

TEACHERS WHO BULLY STUDENTS:
THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explored perceptions of parents who believe their child was bullied by a teacher. The definition used for this study was from McEvoy (2005), “a pattern of conduct, rooted in a power differential that threatens, harms, humiliates, induces fear, or causes emotional distress” (p. 1).

Three individual parent or parent partners were asked to share their stories about their perceived experiences with a bullying teacher. A number of questions guided this research: How do parents come to believe their child is being bullied by a teacher? What are the specific behaviours of the teacher that are perceived by parents as bullying? How do parents respond to their belief their child is being bullied by a teacher? What is the result of the parental response? What are the implications for teacher practice and education?

Themes and patterns were derived from the interview data using reflective analysis techniques. The data revealed parent participants came to the belief their child was being bullied by a teacher through their children’s stories, first impressions of the teacher, validation from others regarding their perceptions and their child’s physical and behavioural changes. Teacher bullying behaviours identified by the participants paralleled those discussed in the literature. Parents responded to their belief their children were being bullied by following understood school protocol and meeting with the teacher. When parents felt the teacher had employed power tactics, they were motivated to take further action. The participants’ past experience with schools, and power and authority perceptions also affected parental responses. Parents expressed feelings of guilt for not acting more quickly to safeguard their child. Parents reported the school communities did not directly address the teacher bullying issue.

Implications emerged for all stakeholders in the school community. For professional associations, school division administrators and board members the focus for change rests with a re-examination of bullying policy and professional codes of ethics. For school principals, symptoms of teacher bullying behaviours and teacher stress and may need more attention. For teachers, building relationships and presenting a professional and caring demeanor are significant considerations influencing parental perceptions. For parents, validation to action comes from listening to their children’s stories and recognizing the symptoms of teacher bullying. Validation and getting involved in their school community may prompt intervention.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

At the beginning of my career as an educator, I had a parent tell me that she panicked all summer about the new teachers who would be in contact with her daughter. This was the first day of school and our first interaction. As a new member of the teaching profession, I didn't know how to respond. Not only was I inexperienced in the classroom, but I was not yet a parent. I didn't understand, so I asked for clarification. She explained that from her perspective, the teachers her child would encounter that year would spend more time with her daughter than she would. She also explained that she worried about these adults because they would influence her daughter's ideas and moods, and would in essence be a strong factor in the development of her child.

I had never thought about my interaction with students in this manner. This parent's comments have remained with me throughout my career. As a result of this conversation, I came to realize the impact that teachers' actions have on students outside of their learning. Later, as a parent, I reflected upon her words and recognized her insight. I wonder if she had any idea the impact she had upon my learning.

This parent had a perception of teachers from her experience. It is rare to find someone in Canada who hasn't participated in school life as a student or parent, and these roles bring "ghosts" to the educational table (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Educators bring experience to the classrooms as well, and when faced with challenges, we, as educators, rely on what we have read, learned and experienced in the education arena. Bullying in schools is one of the challenges we face, and for me, bullying has been lived through many roles: student, educator and parent.

As a student, growing up in an urban setting, I witnessed and experienced bullying by peers and teachers. My friends and I labelled the bullies, but accepted their behaviour as learning experiences and something to tolerate or avoid if possible. The "strap" was beginning to

disappear from teachers' desks, but it was still considered a feasible discipline option among teachers and students. I remember witnessing physical responses from teachers in elementary school; one who threw a defiant student up against the lockers in anger, and one who taped shut the mouth of an overly talkative student. As far as I knew, no one protested and although my classmates and I considered the actions to be "a bit scary," we also naively thought the student should have conformed to the expectations.

I entered the classroom as a first year teacher in 1986 and became a parent in 1992. As an educator and the parent of three boys, I have seen the tears, helplessness and anger of the victim and the power of the bully. Bullying is an emotional and personal topic that is becoming a conversation subject of adults at soccer games, dinner parties and staff rooms. Stories of childhood experiences become intertwined with stories about our children and what they face, daily. These informal, emotionally charged narratives have been the catalyst for my research.

Bullying

Bullying has become a target for school and community agendas. As media highlights the tragic stories of teen suicide and increasing school violence, school boards and communities struggle to find solutions. According to Craig and Pepler (2007), Canada has a significant problem with bullying and "the prevalence of bullying in Canada is greater than the majority of countries" (p. 87). Most of the research on this phenomenon has focused on peer bullying; students bullying other students and the resulting effects on the victims and bystanders (Coloroso, 2002; Olweus, 1993), but what happens when teachers bully students?

Teachers Who Bully Students

According to Parsons (2005):

Bullying students is like shooting fish in a barrel: as a captive audience, students can neither fight nor flee. They are expected to respect and obey their teachers, as they owe their success or failure in school to how those teachers evaluate them. They are quick to accept blame and their fledgling egos can be deflated or destroyed with a few well chosen words or gestures. (p. 39)

Macklem (2003) states that “there is very little data on the extent to which students may be ridiculed, humiliated or be the recipient of verbal aggression from teachers” (p. 31). McEvoy (2005) agrees stating that his research focuses on “an area of abusive behaviour that has received virtually no attention – when teachers bully students” (p. 1). As educators, we encourage students to address bullying behaviours. We teach students about what bullying behaviours look like, we explain the roles of the bully, victim and bystander and make a case for getting involved. We even put up posters to “stop bullying!” Students know they should report bullying to a teacher or another adult in authority, and for the most part, especially in areas like Saskatchewan where bullying policy is mandated, schools have promised to act on these reports and have a plan in place to deal with bullying among students.

Although peer bullying has been targeted in our school programming and policies, students often see parallels in teacher behaviours during instructional lessons. In one of my middle year’s classes a few years ago, a student asked the question, “What happens when the bully is a teacher?” I responded that the behaviours should be reported, as with any bullying behaviours. My response was met with laughter, incredulity and absolute disdain for the ridiculous. The students believed that the possible negative repercussions far outweighed any other scenarios. Although I argued my philosophical position, their response resonated with my personal experience as a student, educator and parent. If students feel that they are bullied by their teacher, what can they do and who can they tell?

The Perspective of Parents

Houndoumadi and Pateraki (2001) found that “victims tend to prefer reporting victimization to their parents” (p. 25), followed by the classroom teacher and friends. Because parents are chosen as the confidants, their perceptions of the situation are important. Nicholson, Evans, Tellier-Robinson and Aviles (2001) state that “using the voices of parents to shape teaching and learning has potential to improve our effectiveness as teachers and children’s achievements as learners” (p. 185). The parental voice could bring a rich perspective to our understanding of the phenomenon of teacher bullying of students.

Rationale

There seems to be very little research regarding teachers who bully students. Considering the power differential involved in this situation, victims will be even more reluctant to discuss the issue for fear of reprisal. Parents who come to believe their child is the victim of teacher bullying have not been given a formal voice in scholarly research. The parental perspective offers the possibility to inform teachers of practices that are viewed and experienced as bullying behaviours by students and parents.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of parents who believe their child has been bullied by a teacher. This research also purposed to determine the behaviours of the teacher which lead the parents to believe that bullying had occurred and the resulting parental response.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research in addressing the purpose of this study:

1. How do parents come to believe their child is being bullied by a teacher?
2. What are the specific behaviours of the teacher that are perceived by parents as bullying?
3. How do parents respond to this belief?
4. What is the result of the parental response?
5. What are the implications for teacher practice and education?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature that exists concerning bullying in our schools, particularly with respect to the limited literature that exists regarding teacher bullying. The bullying of students by teachers is a phenomenon that is relatively unexplored and a preliminary review of the literature suggests the voice of the parent in this area is almost silent. This study opens the door to scholarly discussion of parents' perceptions of teachers who bully students.

This study also informs educators of teacher practices perceived as bullying by parents in school communities. As political pressures regarding accountability and bullying in schools collide, educators benefit from the information by becoming knowledgeable of these perceptions and reflecting and acting upon their implications for teachers in the classroom.

Definition of Terms

There are varying definitions of bullying. To clearly define the parameters of bullying by teachers, the following definition will be used for the purpose of this study:

Bullying by teachers: “a pattern of conduct, rooted in a power differential that threatens, harms, humiliates, induces fear, or causes emotional distress” (McEvoy, 2005, p. 1).

Limitations

Due to the nature of qualitative research, and the limited number of participants, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the population.

Basic Assumptions

The following assumptions have been made:

1. Parents will be honest and open in their responses to the interview questions.
2. As a parent and a professional educator, the researcher will be able to create a rapport with the parents being interviewed. This life experience establishes empathy and the ability to affirm authenticity in the interview process.

Summary

Bullying in schools has become a focus of communities and the media. A Canadian web site, www.bullying.org, is an award-winning non-profit internet resource created to help people, worldwide, deal with the issue of bullying. According to the web site, Bullying.org receives nearly one million visitors and contributors from around the world each month. The site offers information about bullying for young people, parents, teachers and communities, with an emphasis on peer bullying. It also offers a forum for sharing stories and ideas and a variety of

other options including games. I e-mailed this organization to find out if they had information available about teacher bullying. The reply stated, “You are correct in stating that our Website has not included information about educators who bully. This is an important topic we hope to include in the future through our Websites and online courses” (Personal communication, November 18, 2007).

Peer bullying has been closely scrutinized in research (Coloroso, 2002; Olweus, 1993; Rees, 2002), while teacher-student bullying has remained relatively obscure in the literature. Personal experience and discussions with other teachers and parents verifies that teacher-student bullying exists. Although there are some references to this phenomenon, parental voices have been silent. This study addresses parents’ perspectives about teachers who bully students.

Chapter Two:

Literature Review

Introduction

What do we know about parents' perceptions of teachers who bully students? Unfortunately, this particular topic has not been studied in an academic manner. During the literature review phase of my research, I was unable to find any references pertaining to this question. There is little information regarding parental perceptions toward the concept of bullying and research about the phenomenon of teacher bullying is rarely found in "education" journals.

Because of the lack of academic literature dealing specifically with parental perceptions of teachers who bully students, an exploration of themes in related literature will be addressed. These themes are definitions of bullying, power, teacher bullying and parental perceptions.

Defining Bullying

According to Lee (2006), "defining bullying at the outset of a project has been a central feature of much of the research into the topic and researchers have used definitions that focus their respondents on their own understanding of what constitutes bullying" (p. 63). Lee lists a variety of factors that have been considered in the definition of bullying: intent, hurt, repetition, duration, power, provocation, culture and context.

A qualitative study conducted by Mishna (2004) found that defining bullying is perceptual. This study investigated bullying from the perspectives of victimized children, their parents and educators. The results indicated that identifying bullying can be confusing and difficult for children, parents and educators. "The complexity seemed related to factors that influenced how each individual viewed a particular incident" (p. 237).

Madsen (1996) found that “a large amount of teachers and parents overlook incidents which children see as bullying” (p. 19). This implies that teachers and parents may see children as oversensitive to bullying, but may also send the message that some bullying is acceptable.

Olweus (1999) seems to be regarded as the pioneer of bullying research. His definition is as follows: “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 10). Naito and Gielen (2005) state that many scholars around the world have accepted Olweus’ definition of bullying. They further comment that “the actions may be direct or indirect and of a more physical or a more psychological nature. In addition, there should be real or perceived asymmetrical power relationships between the bully and his or her victims” (p. 174).

Rigby (2007) comments:

Olweus suggested that bullying occurs only when there is an “imbalance of power”. The aggressor or aggressors are more powerful in some way than the person they are targeting. This suggestion has been adopted by most (not all) subsequent writers. (p. 1)

Rigby (2007) suggests that society’s definition of bullying is fluid. As our understanding of relationships change, so too will our definition of bullying. He states:

Teachers who caned were once simply doing their job; now he or she is a bully. We need to recognize that the criteria that determine how power and authority should be exercised are constantly changing. So too must be our conception of what is bullying. (p. 2)

If defining bullying is difficult and perceptual, teachers may not recognize their own actions as bullying, while others may perceive teachers’ actions as such.

I have seen examples of this perceptual inconsistency as an educator. In one situation, I could hear, from my office, the teacher repeatedly berate students in terms of their intelligence. I noticed that one student, in particular, seemed to be targeted consistently. I began to stand in the doorway, when I overheard the diatribe, as if needing to speak to a student. The teacher did not stop the behaviour, but always finished his thought before addressing my needs. This illustrates he had no perception that the behaviour was questionable.

When looking at the social context of various times in history or culture, we can see that many of the behaviours we once considered acceptable are no longer politically correct. There

was once a time when it was accepted by the social norm for a man to pat the bottom of his secretary, now this action would be considered sexual harassment or assault. Perhaps our classrooms have also been places of temporal, social and cultural perceptions.

In 1979, Pink Floyd recorded, *The Wall*. Some of the songs on this album refer to bullying in the classroom and the wall that has been built between the youth and those in power. The following lyrics illustrate the frustration of students toward the behaviours of their teachers.

“The Happiest Days of Our Lives” (R. Waters, 1979)

When we grew up and went to school
There were certain teachers who would
Hurt the children in any way they could
By pouring their derision upon anything we did
And exposing every weakness
However carefully hidden by the kids

“Another Brick in the Wall, Part 2” (R. Waters & D. Gilmour, 1979)

We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teachers leave them kids alone
Hey! Teachers! Leave them kids alone!
All in all it's just another brick in the wall.
All in all you're just another brick in the wall.

Considering this album sold millions of copies, not only in the United Kingdom, but world wide, these sentiments must have resonated with the youth of the time. Many of the senior teachers today would have grown up with this oppression as students in the classroom. Does modeled behaviour from our childhood classroom experience provide a framework for what we believe to be acceptable behaviour? Perhaps we need to more formally define unacceptable teacher behaviour just as society has begun to define sexual harassment in the workplace.

Power and Power Differential

Power in the classroom should be considered as a prerequisite to the power differential in bullying of students by teachers. Manke (1997) discusses society's view of teacher power in the classroom. She portrays students and teachers in "power relationships they build together and calls into question common assumptions about the workings and results of power in the classroom" (p. 1). She states that our culture perceives classrooms in which "teachers have power and students do not. The understanding is part of the cultural knowledge that students and teachers bring to the school" (p. 2). She comments that because of this cultural belief, teachers tend to be held accountable for all outcomes of the classroom and that school institutions support the teachers in controlling students.

Students are sent to the office to be punished or scolded by administrators or secretaries; they stand in hallways and receive public disapproval; they serve detentions; they are suspended; in some schools, they receive corporal punishment. Their parents are not surprised to be asked to support the school's discipline. (p. 2)

If Manke is correct in her assertion that we, as a culture, believe teachers hold the power, it follows that students also perceive this power differential in the classroom.

Manke (1997) further comments that "teachers are seen as problem if they do not seem to have power – to be in control of their students. Such teachers are more likely to receive assistance or even to be dismissed than teachers whose students do not learn" (p. 2). As a result, teachers may feel pressure to control students, so that they are perceived by others as holding power. Parson (2005) suggests that a teacher's reputation and possibility for promotion may hinge on control. "Teachers who can keep their classes quiet, obedient and on task are valued by their superiors. The easiest way to achieve this kind of control, of course, is through the imbalance of power intrinsic to teaching" (p. 43). What teachers or administrators may perceive as necessary to maintain control or good classroom management, students may perceive as bullying behaviours. If a student made a claim of teacher bullying, would the teacher even consider the possibility? If control is prized by administration, would student perceived bullying be considered by the principal to be an overreaction, a ridiculous complaint or justified teacher behaviour?

Okabayashi (1996) suggests that sometimes a teacher may want to escape from the problems of school bullying because “other teachers might think his student management skill is poor when others find he has bullies in his classroom” (p. 177). Often when students misbehave, teachers wonder about their home life. It is not uncommon for teacher control to be questioned as well. Okabayashi further comments that sometimes a “bully’s behaviour is similar to the teacher’s behaviour in the classroom (a bully is modeling his teacher’s behaviour)” (p. 177). If a child is targeted by a teacher, do students begin to see the behaviour as acceptable or do they see the targeted child as less acceptable?

A parent told me the story of his son, who in the early years of his education was an average student who was well accepted by peers. One year, he missed a lot of school because of an unusual illness that was difficult to diagnose. The teacher believed the child was not really ill, so whenever the child tried to return to school, she made comments that intimated the child was not working hard and was likely to repeat the grade. The teacher’s behaviour was targeted and repeated. According to the parent, his son’s classmates said the teacher also made pointed comments about the child to the other students even when he was not present. When the young man returned to school full time, his peers began to treat him differently, and eventually he became the victim of peer bullying. This informally shared parental perspective of teacher bullying illustrates the validity of Okabayashi’s statement.

Golish and Olson (2000) comment that “power and compliance-gaining are intertwined concepts” (p. 295). Both teachers and students use power to get what they want. Students will use coercion to get an extension on an assignment and teachers use various tactics to achieve student compliance. Golish and Olson also discuss a variety of power-based behavioural altering techniques or messages teachers use to gain this compliance. These techniques are divided into prosocial techniques and antisocial techniques. Prosocial techniques include “messages that are designed to benefit students by encouraging and rewarding them” (p. 295). Positive messages may be communicated through recognition of student leadership, or phone calls home for good effort. These techniques have been linked to positive student outcomes and teacher satisfaction. Antisocial techniques are “strategies used to punish students, foster competitiveness and/or undermine students’ self-worth” (p. 295). Negative messages may be communicated through lectures pointing out inadequacies, negative feedback, or comparisons of students’ abilities.

According to Nobes and Pawson (2003), older children's "judgements of authority are strongly influenced by the social position – such as school principal or parent – of people who give directives" (p. 79). They further comment that young people see authority as jurisdictional. Teachers have authority at school, parents at home. Further to this, they also comment that children accept that authority can be extended to others by adults. A parent or teacher may place another child in charge of the situation during their absence. This simplistic acceptance of adult authority further demonstrates the power differential between teachers and students in the classroom. If compliance techniques, particularly those antisocial in nature, are used regularly by teachers to gain control or power, can they be considered bullying?

As a middle year's educator for over twenty years, I have needed to employ a rather stern demeanour with certain students on occasion. As I began to reflect upon the idea of the "teacher bully," I also began to question classroom management strategies, the possible effects on the students and the perceptions of their parents. Classroom teachers are expected to teach students in a safe and positive environment, conducive to learning. At what point do management techniques become bullying behaviours? Could the repetitive refocusing of a talkative student be perceived as inappropriate by students or parents? With classroom control considered to be a quality of effective teachers (Stronge, 2007), where do we draw the line, and how do educators protect their reputations?

Teachers Who Bully Students

Classroom and school environments are comprised of people. Educators know that the personalities and experiences of the students can affect the atmosphere of the classroom. The addition of one strong personality can drastically change the classroom dynamics, positively or negatively. The teacher also brings personality, past experiences and biases to the classroom. As with all relationships, disagreements are inevitable, but clashes between teachers and students or parents may develop over very real issues such as racism, stereotypes or gender bias.

Stronge (2007) observes:

Teachers have a powerful, long-lasting influence on their students. They directly affect how students learn, what they learn, how much they learn, and the ways they interact with one another and the world around them. (p. ix)

Considering the degree of the teacher's influence in the classroom, it is important to recognize what teachers, as a people, bring to school and classroom environments.

Hopefully, people who choose education as a career are suited to the profession.

Noddings (2005) states:

It is sometimes said that "all teachers care." It is because they care that people go into teaching. However, this is not universally true; we all have known teachers who are cruel and uncaring, and these people should not be in teaching at all. (p. 1)

Noddings (2005) suggests that caring is relational and that the perceptions of all of the stakeholders in the school environment must be considered. She comments that many researchers devise instruments that measure "caring" through observable teacher behaviours, but when asked, the students do not necessarily agree with the outcome of the researcher's analysis.

"She's tough," a student may say with some admiration. "She makes us work hard." Students in such situations often do what they are told, but they have no real interest in what is being taught. They just plod along, driven by the teacher, and escape studies whenever an opportunity arises. They come to equate caring with coercion and good teaching with hard work and control. Guiltily, they recognize the teacher as "caring," but they do not themselves feel cared for. (Noddings, 2005, p. 1)

Once again, the concept of control is equated with good teaching. Is it possible that some behaviours used by teachers to gain control could begin to fit the definition of teacher bullying? Could some of these behaviours become "a pattern of conduct, rooted in a power differential that threatens, harms, humiliates, induces fear, or causes emotional distress" (McEvoy, 2005, p. 1)?

Parson (2003) comments:

The ingredients that enable teacher-student bullying are intrinsic to the environment. The power imbalance is clear: adults direct and students obey. The prime directive for schools is clear: maintain control of the students. The hierarchy of power in schools is clear: teachers have power over students in their classes; principals have power over all the students and all the adults in the building. (p. 39)

Parson's explanation of the power imbalance in schools is clearly hierarchical with control of the students as a central theme. Given this theory, teachers have a lot of pressure to control student

behaviour in their classrooms and as was noted earlier (Manke, 1997), their jobs and reputation may be at stake.

Craig and Pepler (2007) discuss bullying as a destructive relationship problem. They suggest that “promoting relationships is everybody’s responsibility because bullying occurs in all contexts where individuals come together to work and play” (p. 89). They also suggest that the consequences of bullying are far reaching.

Lessons of power and aggression learned in childhood bullying can lead to sexual harassment (McMaster, Connolly, Pepler & Craig, 2002), dating aggression (Pepler, Craig, Blais & Rahey, 2005), and may later extend to workplace harassment, as well as marital, child, and elder abuse. (Craig & Pepler, 2007, p. 88)

Craig and Pepler (2007) also support Okabayashi’s (1996) suggestion that teachers’ behaviours can influence the behaviours of students in their classroom. “All adults are models for children and must lead by example and refrain from using their power aggressively” (p. 89).

According to McEvoy (2005), bullying by teachers is similar to peer-on-peer bullying. He suggests the following parallels:

1. There is abuse of power.
2. The abuse is public and generates attention.
3. The actions distress the target.
4. There is repetition of abuse.
5. There are relatively no consequences or retribution for the bully.
6. Victims may be chosen on the basis of vulnerability.
7. Victims are treated differently than peers and differences may be pointed out to the group.

McEvoy also agrees with Craig and Pepler (2007) and Okabayashi (1996) suggesting that teacher bullying behaviours model bullying for the students in the classroom. He states that, “as a consequence, the student may also become a scapegoat among peers” (p. 2). On a small scale, we see this when students chime in with the teacher to correct a peer’s behaviour.

A study by Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco and Brethour (2006) examined teachers' perceptions of bullying by other teachers. 116 teachers from seven elementary schools in the United States responded to an anonymous questionnaire aimed at finding out about teachers' experiences and their perceptions of their colleagues. Those surveyed were Kindergarten through fifth grade teachers. The schools themselves were diverse. Three schools were situated in predominately white, affluent areas with traditional family structures. The other four schools were situated in lower socio-economic areas and were comprised of predominately minority children from single parent families.

The results revealed that teachers who had, themselves, experienced bullying as a young person were more likely to bully or be bullied by students. This study also revealed two main types of teacher bullies: a sadistic bully and a bully-victim. The sadistic bully is the type of person who bullies for pleasure; the bully-victim is the type of person who provokes the bullying and then acts the victim. Approximately 45 percent of the teachers surveyed in this study admitted to bullying a student themselves. "Some teachers reported being angry at being asked the question, but more reflective teachers realized that bullying is a hazard of teaching, and all people bully at times and are victims and bystanders at times" (p. 194).

It is interesting to note that although teachers seem to recognize bullying behaviors in themselves and others, the culture of the school still positively recognizes some of these behaviors. Parsons (2005) comments:

Teachers can use ridicule, intimidation and fear to maintain control in a classroom. Those who do are rewarded with a word-of-mouth reputation for "being tough but fair," "being strict but gets the job done," "knowing how to make them toe the line." (Parsons, 2005, p. 43)

Bullying of students by teachers is reported to be happening in classrooms. A search on the internet reveals numerous websites that discuss this phenomenon. McEvoy (2005) comments:

Although simple justice and sound educational practices demand attention to teachers who bully students, there are no national studies of this phenomenon. There is, however, overwhelming anecdotal evidence. Narrative accounts from students and former students, from parents, and even from non-abusive teachers about those who mistreat students with

impunity seem to abound. Thus, the need to study a phenomenon that has largely been ignored is evident. (p. 5)

Schmeiser, author of an online web log called “The Rage Diaries,” comments on the study conducted by Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco and Brethour (2006):

This is the kind of thing that makes me irrationally furious. Yes, elementary schoolers can get the smart mouth, and yes, it is very hard to keep order in a class when the kids are maybe not used to getting any discipline at home and your boss is all, ‘try not to do anything that gets the school district sued.’ ... So yes, teachers get the fuzzy end of the lollipop. But at the same time -- they are the people who are there to help kids learn. That is their job. They are authority figures. And these bullies are sending the message, “you don't deserve to learn, and the system will never be on your side.” What is saddest: the teachers who bullied were likely to have been bullied themselves as kids. It's a sick, sad cycle, and something in our school system is broken if this cycle is permitted to keep on rolling. (June 28, 2006)

The responses she received regarding these comments were personal stories from those who had been affected by teacher bullying. Schmeiser’s web log is one of many amateur or non-professional websites where personal stories are being shared by victims and their parents.

What do these web logs offer for readers? Do they provide a venue to “trash” teachers or do they offer people an opportunity to have their story heard and a starting place for healing. Perhaps there is no other place for victims and their parents to have a voice.

Teacher bullying is also discussed in a non-refereed online journal dealing with teen issues (www.teenissues.co.uk). According to the website, “TeenIssues was formed to offer a unique reference point on what teenagers want to know.” The features and articles are written by experts and journalists. One article discusses teacher bullying in terms of what it is and how to stop it. The article concludes with this statement: “Remember, bullying often comes down to “he said, she said” so a clear record of incidences is the best evidence you can provide. Good Luck!” (p. 2).

This may, actually, be good advice. McEvoy (2005) states that “teachers who bully may employ a number of methods to deflect anticipated or actual complaints about their offensive

conduct” (p. 2). The teacher may try to convince the target they are crazy or misunderstanding the teacher’s actions. They may question the motives of the complainant or suggest that the objection is a way to excuse poor behavior on the part of the student. These techniques minimize the teacher’s conduct as it is reframed as a difference of perception rather than an abuse of power. McEvoy (2005) further comments that “any complaint about the abusive behavior places the student at risk of retaliation by the teacher, including the use of grades as a sanction” (p. 3).

How do children confront this type of adult behavior? How can they make their story heard? The most logical advocate for students is their parents and the parents’ perceptions and past experiences may affect their response.

Parental Perceptions

Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco and Brethour (2006) noted that teachers who had been bullied as children may be more likely to bully their students. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), parents may also bring their past history into play with respect to their perceptions of their child’s education. “Every time parents and teachers encounter one another in the classroom, their conversations are shaped by their own autobiographical stories and by the broader cultural and historical narratives that inform their identities, their values, and their sense of place in the world” (p. 1). If parents’ personal stories from their childhood intersect with or echo their child’s stories of teacher bullying, a passionate and defensive response may occur. “The adults come together prepared to focus on the present and the future of the child, but instead they feel themselves drawn back into their own pasts, visited by the ghosts of their parents, grandparents, siblings, and former teachers, haunted by ancient childhood dramas” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 1). Memories from the past may fuel passion and the desire to protect their children, but they can also be described as the whispers of experience. Perhaps experience enables parents to recognize patterns in the stories and behaviours of their child.

There is much literature dealing with how educators regard parental involvement in schools (Epstein, 1986, 1995; Lawson, 2003; Nicholson et al., 2001; Nakagawa, 2000). One attitude which reflects a notion that parents are not smart enough to know what is good for their children, educationally, is clearly defined by Nicholson, Evans, Tellier-Robinson and Aviles (2001). Aviles writes: “Like so many educators, I thought they were not educated enough to

understand how they could help their children or that they could make a difference” (p. 184). Nicholson et al (2001) suggest that qualitative research may better inform educators about parental perspectives. They comment that:

Parent involvement requires that parents’ roles be identified to give them a productive voice in their children’s education. Qualitative research is one way to discover the voices of parents and allow them to share their knowledge in their children’s classrooms. (p. 184)

They further suggest that:

We must be cautious when making assumptions about parents’ views and interest in their children. Educators should embrace the potential of parents as partners in the education of their children and recognize that qualitative methodology can be a valuable tool in educational research. Using the voices of parents to shape teaching and learning has potential to improve our effectiveness as teachers and children’s achievements as learners. (p. 185)

Epstein (1995) discusses the theory of overlapping spheres of influence that directly affect student learning and development: the family, the school and the community. “The internal model of the interaction of the three spheres of influence shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school, and in the community” (p. 702). This theory suggests there is valuable information to learn from all of the influences of a child’s life. If these spheres do, in fact, overlap, how can we discount the contributions of parents?

Noonan and Renihan (2005) discuss Heward’s (2003) perceptions of the importance of parental involvement. “First, parents know their children’s needs better than do educators; second, families have the greatest vested interest in the success of their children; third, parents represent the most consistent adults in children’s lives during their school years” (p. 7).

As a child grows and continues through the halls and classrooms of the school community, the parent or guardian tends to be the constant in the child’s life. Parents hold their child’s history and growth as part of their knowledge, whether they are involved parents, or

simply present in the home. There is much that educators can learn about the needs of the individual child from their parents.

Summary

Educators, as complex individuals, bring more to the classroom than simple practice. “If teachers are to learn to respond to the ghosts that parents bring to the classroom, they too have to learn to recognize the autobiographical and ancestral roots that run through their own school lives” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 2). Bullying behaviours from their childhood and power and control expectations and issues may all contribute to teacher responses to students that may be perceived as bullying behaviours. Considering the power differential, parents may need to speak on behalf of their children. The literature has identified qualitative research as an important tool to discover the parental voice.

Chapter Three:

Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods used in this study. It includes the rationale for the research design, participant selection process, data collection procedures, the method of data analysis, and ethical considerations.

Rationale

A favourite topic of conversation for many parents is their children. They discuss numerous aspects of parenting and their children's lives, including school life. The purpose of this research is to look at teacher bullying through the eyes of parents; to give voice to the stories of parents. A qualitative research method has been chosen for a variety of reasons.

According to Polkinghorne (2005), "The experiential life of people is the area qualitative research methods are designed to study" (p. 139). He describes experience as vertical in depth and suggests that to study experience, data must consist of the participants' self-reports of the experience. Data collection must "take account of the particular characteristics of the human experience" (p. 139).

Glesne (1999) states that "qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways they intersect" (p. 1). Qualitative research, according to Wilson (1998), "attempts not only to understand the world, but also to understand it through the eyes of the participants whose world it is" (p. 3). This research seeks to gain insight regarding parental perceptions of teachers who bully students. Their stories will reflect these perceptions.

Qualitative research can also be described as process oriented. Palys (1997) states that research should "unfold and evolve as more and more is understood about the phenomena" (p. 297). Considering the sparse literature available about parental perceptions of teacher bullying, it is difficult to create a hypothesis regarding parental responses. A qualitative research methodology offers the flexibility to study emerging themes and unpredictable information.

Participant Selection

According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2007), a small sample size is used in qualitative studies because the purpose is to “develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied” (p. 178). To ensure the data will be relevant to the research questions, participants have been purposefully selected. I selected three individual parent or parent partners for this research. Snowball or chain sampling was chosen as the sampling strategy to ensure participants were able to offer relevant information. Through this type of sampling, colleagues, friends and family are asked to suggest appropriate participants because of the stories already shared, informally. Recommendations for possible participants were requested from my friends, family and colleagues. Through discussion with the referring individuals, I selected possible participants based on their description of the stories shared. The criteria considered in selection included:

1. How recently had the perceived bullying occurred?
2. Was the teacher behaviour repetitive in nature?
3. Were the children in elementary or high school during the perceived bullying experience?

I initiated first contact with two of the participating families to invite their involvement, one through a telephone call and one in person. The third participant was first contacted by the referring individual, who was given permission for me to initiate contact by telephone.

Data Collection

The general interview guide approach was used for data collection. The research questions were used as a guide to ensure all research questions were addressed during the interview. According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2007), “this interview approach has the advantage of providing reasonably standard data across respondents” (p. 246). Additionally, Gall et al discuss Patton’s (2003) general interview guide approach which outlines a set of topics to be explored rather than specifically crafted questions. The main ideas are defined, but the order and wording can be decided as the interview progresses. Because the information sought was sensitive in nature, the interviews were unstructured and the individual cadence and stories of the participants lead the questions and conversation.

Each interview was conducted face to face in a mutually agreed upon location. Interviewees were assured of anonymity and the process by which their anonymity would be safeguarded. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Copies of the interview transcripts were given to the participants for approval. The participants were able to modify, add or delete any parts of the transcript before it was analyzed. This process enabled interviewees the opportunity to clarify their ideas. A transcript release form was signed by participants prior to analysis.

Participants were asked to read for authenticity, the first copy of their story and the reflection. They were invited to suggest changes to ensure their perceptions were honoured.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents who believe their child has been bullied by a teacher. Manual interpretive analysis was used to identify underlying themes, constructs and patterns. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) suggest this type of data analysis is useful for researchers to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied. Glesne (1999) states the following:

Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with the data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link your story to other stories. (p. 130)

Reflective analysis was also used to analyze the data. This type of analysis relies on the intuition, experiences and judgment of the researcher, thus linking the stories. According to Gall, Gall and Borg (2007), this type of research is ideally suited for “generating thick description, but can also lead to the discovery of constructs, themes and patterns” (p. 472).

Ethical Considerations

Due to the participant selection methodology, full confidentiality could not be guaranteed. However, every possible precaution was taken including the use of pseudonyms for the participants, their children, the school and any additional individual named during the interview. Participants chose their own pseudonyms. The issues regarding confidentiality were

explained to each participant so they had the opportunity to not answer a question or discontinue the interview if they chose.

Because of the sensitive nature of this study, the locations of the interviews required privacy. Two of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. The home of a vacationing family member was used for the third interview to ensure anonymity and a quiet location. The participants were asked to speak about a personal and emotional time in their lives so it was important to listen and respond with sensitivity and empathy. The initial interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. To honour the participants' contributions to the study, they were asked to read and respond to their stories and the following reflection to ensure authenticity. I met with each participant family to make certain their desired changes were accurate. These meetings were not audio taped, however, any pertinent comments or ideas shared were recorded in field notes.

Summary

This study adds the parental voice to the research and literature regarding teachers who bully students. A qualitative methodology was chosen to gather the information rich narratives of parents. Although participants have been specifically selected because of their previously shared stories, every precaution has been taken to preserve anonymity for all.

Chapter Four:

Parents Share Their Stories

This chapter relates the stories shared by the participants of this study. The accounts of the incidents and perspectives of the participants have been reported followed by a reflection which addresses the original research questions and links the literature to the emerging themes. The sequence of the participants' stories is chronological according to the order they were interviewed.

The names of the participants, their children, the schools and any other identifying information have been changed to protect the anonymity of the individuals. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants. The stories have been edited for readability and chronology and approved by the participants to ensure authenticity of the stories. The voice of the participants has been a priority in the disclosure of these perceived teacher bullying incidents.

Tina's Story

Tina is a mother in her early 40s. Her husband is about five years older than she and her sons are ages 11 and 13. Tina dropped out of school when she was young, but returned for her grade 12 equivalence (GED). She has taken a bookkeeping course, some computer classes at the university, as well as other courses through her workplace.

Tina is the primary caregiver of the family. In the interview, she stated, "*My husband is not involved at all in our children's schooling.*" Although she discusses the children with her husband, it is her role to deal with the school. Tina and her husband work outside of the home. Tina believes both her children have been bullied by a teacher.

Track and Field

The first story Tina shared occurred in a small urban elementary school of approximately 180 students. She believes her eldest son, Peter, who was in grade four, was bullied by the track coach, who also happened to be the vice principal of the school.

My son was in grade four and trying very hard to get along with everybody. He had known these kids for two years. He tried out for the track team and he went every morning without fail. He went every time they ever had anything going on, at lunch hour, at recess, after school, anything he was told to do he did. He's not the fastest guy on the block, in fact, he's probably the slowest and so what I kind of gave him credit for was that he was loyal to the program.

Tina's son missed about three practices due to illness before the "big" track meet.

Peter was sick for a couple of weeks and missed, I think, three practices and they weren't all in a row. When it came time for the big meet, the big, big meet... and he was so excited about this... he was told he was the only one who was not allowed to attend.

Tina investigated this decision with her son by asking the coach for clarification. She commented, "When I asked if maybe could he come and just watch and be part of the team and be a spare, he was shot right down. He was told, 'Don't bother coming.'" Tina clearly understood that her son had missed practices and accepted the coach's decision to not allow him to participate in the races. She explained,

I understand that kids have to try out and they have to make the grade and all that kind of thing... I can understand that in grade eight... you know when they're a little bit older, but this was the very first year he qualified to be in track... it was ridiculous. If you [are not allowed] to participate, you should be a part of the group anyway, because you've been a part of the group the whole time.

Tina, later, spoke to the coach privately. "I said, 'Whoa that was just totally unacceptable, that's not how we want to be treated.' I was told, 'That's just the way it is.'" Tina was also told she was not to bring him to the meet as a spectator. The coach indicated the parking was too difficult and the individual entrance fees expensive.

Tina decided she needed to go to the principal.

I took it the next level, to the principal. I actually wrote a letter and it was quite detailed in what happened, saying that my kid will likely never participate in that sport ever again. His self esteem was rock bottom at the end of that interview with this teacher. I had no satisfaction [from either administrator]; I still haven't to this day.

Tina believes the decision to exclude her son was wrong, but feels there is a bigger picture to be considered.

The issue was [that my son] was just shot right down and in my opinion that's just being a total bully. "I'm bigger than you, I'm in charge here and you have no say in this..."

The coach could have fixed that problem by just saying, "Come and cheer, you need to be there, be the water boy, come and cheer and help people out..."

This shared story does not fully fit the criteria for a teacher bully in that the behaviour has not been reported to be repetitive in nature. The parent and child changed their situation and the teacher was no longer in regular contact with Tina's son, Peter. Peter did not join track the following year and later moved to a different school to participate in a special program being offered there. Peter was never a student of the teacher in this incident. Even though the situation was resolved through circumstance and some design, Tina, as a parent in the school community, believes there is a continuing issue. *"Ever since then, when I've passed [the coach] in the hallways, he does not speak to me. It is totally unprofessional... [but], I'm in his face saying, 'Good Morning.'"*

Tina also believes this incident has had a lasting effect on her family. When asked if she believes Peter will ever participate in a similar sport, her reply was very direct,

Never again... he absolutely will not and it's too bad. You know people say, "Oh kids get over things..." he'll never get over that...I'll never get over it. This interview has brought it back. We still have that same person in our school and as we're getting closer and closer to having my second son in his class, I'm a little nervous. I'm more than nervous actually... I am [worried that he will be the teacher] for my younger son, Larry. For him, I think it will have to be a different class or a different school. I'm hoping there's going to be a transfer.

New School, New Teacher

The second story Tina shared involved her son, Larry, who was 10 years old at the time. It was Larry's first year at this school of about 400 students, but it was Tina's second year as a parent in the school community as her eldest son, Peter had enrolled in the school for a special program the previous year. Tina explained that Larry is intellectually gifted, *"probably the top*

two percentile.” She also indicated that school life has not been easy for Larry. “He has some social issues, and the social issues come, I believe, because he is so intelligent.”

Larry’s homeroom teacher was also new to the school. *“This guy, kind of right off the bat, moved education back about 40 years. He made the children sit with their feet on the floor, facing forward; with their hands on their laps... he had some extremely strict rules.”* Tina was able to get a clearer impression of her child’s new teacher at the school’s ‘Meet the Teacher’ Night.

He’s likely late 20s, early 30s... It’s not that he’s a 55 year old who’s got an old age education; he really has new age education. He told the parents at the teacher meet and greet night how things were going to run in his classroom and all of us, basically, picked our jaws up off the floor because it was crazy.... The kids were not allowed to talk to each other, they were not allowed to talk to him unless they put their hand up and waited for everything to be quiet and for him to acknowledge them. They weren’t allowed, actually, to put their hand up more than once you know, they were told just to let everybody else have a turn.

Tina believes the teacher targeted her son from the beginning and set him up for social failure. *“He was totally isolated by this teacher right off the bat... Larry knew every answer to every question and, at a grade five level, he didn’t quite [understand] that some people don’t want you to know the answers all the time.”* Tina explained that Larry rarely picks up social cues and when he does, he ignores them. Larry raised his hand often in class, but other than to say, “We already know you know the answers, Larry,” the teacher did not respond.

He was ignored, completely. When he handed his work in, he never once got a pat on the back. You and I know there are kids out there who absolutely need that kind of recognition. They need to be acknowledged. I think if you hand your work in somebody should say, “Thank you for handing your work in.” Or if you hand your work in and it’s absolutely brilliant, somebody should say, “You did a good job.” I think it depends on the kind of kid you are. If you never get your homework handed in and you finally get it done and hand it in, you should get a pat on the back for getting the job done. For Larry, it was that he just needed somebody to say that he was doing a good job.

Socially, Larry struggled. *“None of the kids liked Larry right off the bat because of the teacher.”* Tina explained that Larry had been repeatedly placed for group work with very active children who demanded that he do all the work because he was smart. When the work was handed in, the product was accepted as being completed by children other than Larry. Tina feels her son was set up to fail. *“How that all came about I’m not exactly sure, because I wasn’t in the classroom, but I do know that it ended up being such an issue that the two friends Larry had going into the year, he didn’t have after the first month.”*

The atmosphere of the classroom also distressed Larry.

As soon as this teacher would walk out of the classroom, [the children] would become orang-utans. They would literally be bouncing off walls, hitting each other, throwing things and [later], then he’d walk into the classroom and he’d have them all after school because they were behaving like children instead of like little automatons sitting in their desk with their faces forward.

As the weeks progressed, Tina realized her son was unhappy in the classroom, so she approached the teacher to come up with a plan.

I went into the classroom to talk to the teacher after school one day and said, “I really need to set up a meeting with you. Larry is a bright student and needs extra stimulation and he’s really not getting it from your class. I understand you have two levels of grades here and plus you have 30 kids and he’s only one of those kids but we do need something for Larry. He’s getting bored in your class. What can we do?” What he came up with was, *“It’s okay... I’ll give him more work.”*

Awhile later, a meeting was set up with a consultant from the school division and the teacher to discuss Larry’s academic needs. They decided to put Larry on an advanced mathematics program, which was to be done while the rest of the class worked on their classroom mathematics program. Unfortunately, this program further alienated Larry.

Every time it came up to math time, Larry was told to go do his thing while the rest of the class did theirs. They couldn’t help but notice he was being treated differently than them and it wasn’t in a positive way. It could have been done in a positive way. [The teacher] told me, “I’ve never had to deal with anybody like this in my life. I don’t know what to

do.” I said, “Well, first of all, you don’t ignore him because if you ignore him then he gets frustrated. If there are questions being asked in class and he has his hand up, you could pick him every so often.” [The teacher responded], “But we already know he knows the answers to everything.” I said, “That’s true, but it still makes him a part of things you know.”

Larry confided some of his feelings to his mother,

Larry thought he was the worst teacher that he could have ever had... “I don’t like his teaching style, he totally doesn’t understand me, he is so rude to the kids, he yells at them all the time, and we can’t do anything right...” Those are all the kind of feelings that Larry was having and in the midst of all this, Larry was feeling sick and not going to school and doing really bad socially.

After three weeks of school, Larry didn’t want to go to school. What alerted Tina to what she believed to be bullying by the teacher was Larry’s declining health and his withdrawn attitude at home.

To me, it was partly Larry’s decline in health... and I know that there were issues in the classroom with certain kids, but I also know a lot of other kids left that classroom. [Larry and I] have been really, really close, like seriously close. He feels like he can tell me anything, but he quit talking to me for a couple of weeks, completely and totally. He totally withdrew and after those two weeks, we took him out of school for a few days to shake him up and get him sorted out. He finally started talking and then he couldn’t quit. [It was] a letting loose of everything that was going on. There were serious issues in the classroom with the kids because they were so stifled that they couldn’t be kids in the classroom. When they got out of the classroom or when the teacher left, they went just insane. Larry said, “You wouldn’t believe it mom. They’re just running around, throwing food. It’s just a mess.”

Larry also withdrew from his long time friends and activities.

Larry kind of quit talking to all his friends from his last school. He really had a meltdown... shut everyone out. He didn’t want to go to hockey anymore, he was quitting

everything. He was totally depressed and he was under a doctor's care... Seriously, we went through three specialists.

After spending time trying to find alternatives for her son with the teacher, she approached the principal, but did not feel that anything had been accomplished. They discussed removing Larry from the classroom and placing him in the other grade five class, but the teaching styles were similar between the two men, so the principal felt it would be a waste of time.

[I asked] about a combination of home schooling and schooling and I was told, "That's not done you know..." So this has gone on now for September, October, November and December and out of those four months, Larry missed something like 45 days of school or something, an absolutely ridiculous amount of school... just absolutely ridiculous.

In an unrecorded conversation (field notes, January, 20, 2008), Tina explained that she feels the principal did everything he could to help her child. She feels the principal's "hands were tied." However, the perceived bullying behaviours were never addressed.

According to Tina, Larry cried everyday.

Tina: *Oh gawd, every day, he cried every day.*

Interviewer: *Did he cry about his peers or did he cry about the teacher?*

Tina (crying): *Teacher...*

Larry went back to school after the Christmas break, but things did not improve. Larry had missed almost half of his school year. Tina explained that her son was then publicly belittled by this teacher.

Larry decided he was changing his name because he didn't feel that Larry was going to be a professional name to have as a writer. He went to his teacher and he said, "I've changed my name and I prefer to be called Bob" and his teacher belittled him about it in front of the classroom. The teacher said, "Oh really? Larry, so why are we calling you Bob now?" Larry explained to him that his name was not a professional name to be a writer and that is his goal in life to be a writer and [the teacher] just shut him down. Larry left school that day sobbing... completely and totally out of control.

Tina and her husband removed him from the school in February. He returned to his old school and had a very successful experience.

[His new teacher] looks right at the child and speaks directly to the child and then he stops talking and he listens to the child. This teacher is a wild and crazy teacher a lot of the times, he talks a mile a minute and he goes full tilt, but when he has one on one with the child he is listening to that child and he's hearing. I think that's really what kids desperately need. They don't need to be put aside all the time, that's going to happen because life's busy, but if it happens too often, it just erodes their self esteem so terribly that they can't come forward again.

Looking back, Tina believes she waited far too long to remove her child from this teacher bullying situation.

In retrospect, I should have taken him out the first time we had an issue with his teacher and not sent him back... But I was the one who kept thinking, just get through this year... and we say that to our kids all the time, get through this week, this month, this year, next year it'll be different... new teacher, a totally new exciting program for grade six, some really positive things. We didn't make it.

Reflection

The two stories shared by Tina are very different in timeframe. The first incident was an isolated event with lasting repercussions; the second incident was a more gradual experience for the family. The situations were very different. Peter's coach was rarely in contact with him, except through track and field. He had limited time with Peter, who could easily avoid the teacher by quitting track. Larry's position was different. Because this person was his homeroom teacher in an elementary school, Larry was under the care of this teacher all day. He was expected to be in school, so easy avoidance tactics, other than illness, were not possible.

Tina became aware of the issue with Peter, because he told her. Peter had no choice, but to tell his mother about the situation because she was expecting to take him to a track meet. Larry's situation was, again, different. Tina became aware of the problem gradually. Her first clue was her personal response when she met the teacher. She was very uncomfortable with his educational philosophy and strict, unforgiving rules. Although Larry shared some of his frustrations about his classroom experience, it was his declining health and withdrawn attitude that alerted Tina to the problem. Even during the time when she was addressing her son's

educational challenges with the school, Larry continued to regress until he refused to speak, quit all of his outside activities and spent every day crying. Tina was aware that other children were also having difficulty with the teacher because they were removed from the school by their parents. Mishna (2004) discusses the complexity of the identification of bullying behaviour. It is very perceptual in nature. Where the accepted research suggests that behaviours must be repetitive and targeted to be considered bullying (Olweus, 1999, Naito & Gielen, 2005, McEvoy, 2005), Tina felt the single incident involving Peter was damaging enough to her child to warrant the label of bullying.

The perceived bullying behaviours of the two men were very similar. Power and control seemed to be central to both issues, as neither was willing to compromise their choice of direction. Manke (1997) and Parsons (2005) both suggest that teachers who are perceived to hold power over their students are valued by their superiors. One of the men described by Tina was already a vice-principal. Perhaps both men hoped the demonstration of control would further their careers.

Tina also cited negativity and exclusivity as detrimentally affecting her children. Larry's teacher took the behaviours even further. His apparent need for power and control over his students created an unstable classroom environment. The students were conforming to the teacher's expectations because of external control, not self-control. When the teacher was not wielding the power, the classroom became chaotic. Okabayashi (1996) discusses the possibility that if teachers model bullying behaviour it can be replayed in student peer groups. This teacher also publicly belittled Larry, setting him up for ridicule among his peers. According to Larry, this man was rude to his students; he yelled all the time and was generally negative in his attitude. These behaviours are very overt, but Tina believes it was the teacher's lack of acknowledgement of her child and total disregard for his abilities or presence that really affected Larry. All of these behaviours could be characterized as antisocial techniques (Golish & Olson, 2000) such as pointing out inadequacies, undermining self-worth and giving negative feedback. In both cases, Tina first approached the teacher, more than once, to discuss her children's needs. She later contacted the principal of the school. Although Tina attempted to intervene on her children's behalf, she and her sons ultimately chose to remove themselves from the perceived bullying situation. Peter quit track and Larry did not attend class and eventually moved schools.

Tina does not feel satisfied with the school's response to her children's negative experiences. In the first incident, there was only an acknowledgement of the receipt of the letter to the principal. After four years, Peter's coach, who is still part of the staff at the school, seems to be holding a grudge and pretends not to see her in the hallway. Tina is not willing to put Larry at risk and plans to remove him from the school if he is placed in this man's classroom. The principal from the second school dealt with Tina's concerns about the teacher's behaviours by minimizing the situation, citing difference of opinion about personal philosophy and teaching style. This is consistent with Madsen's (1996) suggestion that schools may send the message that some bullying is acceptable by overlooking certain incidents. Tina feels regret and guilt for not protecting her child by removing him from a bullying situation. Reliving these events was, for Tina, a very emotional experience.

Tina seemed surprised at Larry's teacher's educational philosophies because of his young age. She intimated that she would have been more accepting of the teaching style had the man been older. She refers to his educational training as "new age" versus "old age." This illustrates the fluidity of society's definition of bullying outlined by Rigby (2007). This attitude is very consistent with my experiences as a teacher and mother. When I overhear students, or my children's friends, discussing a particular teacher's poor behaviour, they often dismiss the conduct by describing the teacher as, "old school." It seems the culture of our schools excuses some behaviours based on the perceived educational background of the teacher. Noddings (2005) discusses students' perceptions of these types of teachers. She notes that students "come to equate caring with coercion and good teaching with hard work and control" (p.1). What I find most interesting is that some of the offending teachers are actually quite young, but the students still explain away the behaviours in this manner.

Tina's family's experiences also illustrate the impact teachers can have on some students. Peter was exposed to one instance of perceived bullying by a teacher. As a result, after four years, he still will not participate in track and field and the family's trust relationship with this teacher has been totally eroded. Craig and Pepler (2007) consider bullying to be a destructive relationship issue. If this erosion of trust can occur with one negative contact, the potential harm to a child who experiences repetitive, targeted bullying at the hands of a teacher is unthinkable.

Louise and Robert's Story

Louise and Robert are in their early 40's and have two children. Their children are in their early to middle teens. Louise was born and raised in the United Kingdom (UK) as the second of four children in a working class family. She finished high school and then continued to college in the UK where she received, what she described as the equivalent to, a three year social work degree. She was the first individual from her family to pursue post-secondary education. Robert was born in another part of the UK and is also the second of four children in a working class family. Robert attended school there until the age of 16 and then joined the army.

Robert and Louise have lived all over the world. Because Robert has spent a lot of time working away from home, Louise has been the primary caregiver of the children until quite recently. The family moved to Canada within the last five years. Louise and Robert believe both of their children have been bullied by teachers.

High School in England

The first story shared by Louise and Robert occurred in a high school in the UK. Their son, Ross, was 12 years old at the time. The high school was a very different experience in the UK than it has been for them in Canada.

Louise: *Ross went to a school of about 2800 students which was also next door to an adult college... there would be another few thousand there. So, if you can imagine, at nine in the morning, there could be up to 5000 people entering that school area... the school was very cold, but I don't know if you understand what it's like... barbed wire around it, razor wire...*

Robert: *...guards and security guards...*

Louise: *As a parent you couldn't just walk into the school, you had to phone ahead and make an appointment. The guard would let you in and escort you to the main office, so you never got to the classrooms unless a teacher met you and took you to the classroom... I was never able to look into their classroom unless it was in the evening and set up for parent-teacher conferences.*

The teacher that Robert and Louise believe bullied their son, Ross, taught him English. Ross encountered him five to six times per week, depending on the schedule. At the time, Robert

had retired from the army and was already working in Canada. The family planned to join Robert in the next couple of months and the school was aware of their intention. Louise was aware that Ross was having difficulty with one of the students in his English class, but it later became apparent it was an issue with the teacher as well. Louise explained:

There was already an initial problem with a school bully that Ross was having more than one or two difficulties with... It was only through investigating that issue and meeting with the teacher that we realized Ross was being bullied by that teacher... It became apparent that it was more than the one child actually feeling the effects from the teacher. I found this out by getting together and general chit chat with other parents.

Robert and Louise believe one of the main issues they had experienced throughout their children's educational life in the UK was the school's indifference toward military children. Because military families move around a lot, the school did not feel their time was well invested by dealing with the problems. Louise clarified:

Why should the teacher even be putting in the effort when they know that in a year or two down the line, Rob will be off with [a new posting]? ... [Although this had been our experience in the past], this particular instance of bullying was not swept away because Rob was a soldier, but because they knew we were immigrating.

Robert also believes that much of the bullying encountered by Ross was caused by his son's accent. The family describes Ross's accent as being an upper-class accent acquired from his international school experiences. Robert explained:

If you're different that's the natural thing to attack... The accents have always changed wherever we've been, but Ross's accent has stayed the same.

Although Louise knew Ross was unhappy with aspects of his school life, it wasn't until he received an unreported detention that she decided to speak with the teacher. Louise elaborated:

If a child was given detention they had to send a letter home to the parents and the parent had to be given 14 days notice before the detention took place... So there I was, waiting in my car outside of school and getting really angry at poor Ross, then shouting at Ross when he shows up like 40 minutes late... He got detention three times I think, in the space

of a week...Like most parents, I remember saying to Ross, "You must have done something Ross, a teacher does not give detention for no reason."

Louise made an appointment to see the English teacher. In the end, she felt that it was a waste of time. She recalled:

I remember going in there and being very civil and very quiet and saying Ross seemed to have issues and there were problems. He wasn't happy at school, you know. "Could you explain the reason he feels this way?" ... I didn't say, "I think he was victimized by you and he does not understand why he's getting detention."

When pressed, the teacher said Ross was disruptive in class, but was never able to give a concrete example of the behaviour. Ross told his parents he was also targeted in class and repeatedly blamed for things he didn't do. Louise elaborated:

The teacher never actually explained what Ross had done. It turned out that the bullying kid had done the disruptions and Ross and others were blamed for it. The child responsible had even broken a window and punched the teacher and had never received any punishment as a result to my knowledge.

Robert believes it may have also been a case of guilt by association or circumstance. He explained:

Ross was labelled as somebody else that was disrupting class or something like that. Maybe it was because he was sitting next to [the disruptive child] that it [appeared] that Ross was involved in it as well.

After meeting the teacher, Louise was very upset. She described the incident:

I felt intimidated... I suppose he came across as having a superior attitude... His vocabulary was certainly better than mine and I remember thinking he was using words that maybe he thought I wouldn't understand... I actually remember leaving almost in tears and I'm not sure if they were tears of anger at the teacher or at myself... I knew my temper was about to break with him and that's why I left because I didn't want to let myself down in front of my son, to really lose it... I felt like a child ... then in hindsight, going home and thinking about it, blood boiling, getting really angry about it... was probably the best thing because it gave me time then to think about the next move... I

went back to the school and as I remember, the teacher sort of tried to block my way in ... When I asked who I should go and see because I didn't feel we could talk, he never gave me a straight answer. I asked, "Who is higher than you? What is the correct chain of command at the school?" because it's different in different educational systems ... I just remember him rambling on and eventually I got who it was, Ross's Head of Year, and then I had to go to Ross's Head of Year.

Louise went to the next level. She described the response:

His attitude to me was, "Ross is immigrating anyway, I'll move Ross into a different class"... and I said, "No you're not punishing my son"... and the [head of year] said, "Well if you think you can do the job better, you tell me what to do."

Robert and Louise feel their child was targeted by the English teacher. They had never received any complaints from Ross's other teachers at this or any other school. At this school, he would have had about eight teachers. Louise remarked:

Throughout Ross's whole life, we had glowing reports about Ross, an average child, but manners. It was always, "If I had twenty other children like Ross I'd be happy" ... Everyone, except this one teacher who seemed to have a huge problem.

Looking back, Robert and Louise realize that Ross's behaviour had changed during the time he was in contact with this teacher. Louise remembers:

I never picked up on [the clues] in the beginning...it was only after the detention and meeting with his teacher and ... seeing this teacher's attitude about Ross. But when you look back on it, Ross never went out to play... Ross never wanted friends or [to be with anyone] in the house either and he really stayed in his bedroom. We had a nickname for him didn't we? The hermit that lived at the top of the stairs... He became really introverted... didn't really even want to talk that much to us.

Even though he was not at home a lot during this time, Robert also noticed differences in his son's behaviour. He comments:

We knew there was a problem because when it came to that particular day or that class ... I think he started to worry and you knew he was frustrated more and his mood changed.

Although Robert agrees there were changes in his son, he doesn't totally attribute Ross's behaviour changes to teacher bullying. Robert proposed this alternative:

*He was just starting to make friends really, because he was going to high school...
Because Ross moved to different countries, he couldn't really establish relationships...
Because he had to move again, I think he finally realized in his own head, "Why make ...
a positive friend?" I think that was just starting to come into effect.*

Ross survived his year and moved on, but Robert and Louise feel their concerns were never heard by the school. Louise commented:

I don't think that teacher was reprimanded or dealt with ... I don't know because we left shortly after, but talking to other parents, they had the same feelings as me or very similar feelings when they dealt with that teacher.

Louise, Robert and their children have been together in Canada for a few years now. After some discussion, the parents believe the teacher bullying Ross experienced a few years ago, still affects him today. Although they both feel Ross has matured and moved on, they sometimes see remnants of the bullied child. Louise remarked:

I think he's certainly moved on, but I still think there are times you can see it, I really do... Now, if Ross is struggling with a lesson he's still reluctant to go and ask his teacher for help... I don't think it's every teacher and I certainly don't think it's all the time, but I still feel there are certain teachers that if Ross feels that they're in any way... similar in style [to the bullying teacher], then Ross has difficulty approaching that teacher... You could even take that further because there are certain friends ... or acquaintances or people that he meets that Ross can take an automatic dislike to and not be able to explain it.

Robert added:

I think it is possible [to see the effects] because ... he's all of the sudden [back in] the younger part of his life and he worries he's come across a situation where he can't approach somebody.

Welcome to Canada

Louise and the children joined Robert in Canada in October, three months later, and quickly found a home and school. The children were enrolled in an urban K - 8 elementary school with a considerably smaller population of approximately 200 students. Ann had only been in school for a few weeks when Louise and Robert recognized there was a problem. Louise described the situation:

It didn't take long to recognize. You have to understand about Ann. Her whole life, Ann would wake up in the morning and she loved it when it was a school day. She really enjoyed school... That was her whole life, always happy, singing every morning on her way to school, fabulous. We were only here[in Canada] about two weeks and all of the sudden Ann was getting phantom tummy aches, headaches and was not wanting to go to school... [It didn't make sense to us because] Ann was the type of child that would cry if she had a temperature because I was telling her, "You can't go to school like this, Ann." She would cry [because she wanted] to go to school... But did I ever suspect it was a teacher? No... no...

The couple looked at a variety of possible reasons for the change in their daughter. Robert explained his initial response:

I initially thought ... it was the transition of moving from out of the country and so there's got to be a settling down period ... a change of school and curriculum and systems and you've got to allow that [time]... But then we sort of looked in more depth, I think, and we thought, "No there's something wrong."

Louise added:

I think we knew it wasn't [the transition], because Ann was just not that type of child and had handled transitions before with confidence. She embraced change and loved meeting new people.

Ann had changed from a happy student to a reluctant one. The amount of homework was overwhelming, and aside from the fact that Ann had slight dyslexia, Louise and Robert felt there was something going on. Louise recalled the situation:

The amount of homework Ann was bringing home [was a hint]. I thought, this is just not possible... [at her age]... You don't expect to do four or five hours a night of home work, what's going on?

Robert was also concerned about his daughter's ability to understand the concepts. He comments:

She wasn't understanding [the work] either... so we thought, "Okay, it's a different system." I think it was initially hard for her..."

Robert and Louise went to see Ann's teacher to voice their concerns about the amount of homework and her lack of understanding. They were willing to do anything to help their daughter's transition to Canadian school life.

Robert: *We went in to see if we could do something at home... that we could try and make the transition easier.*

Louise: *The teacher said it was too early to tell, although we had given her Ann's full school records with the reports on it about the dyslexia.*

Robert felt the teacher's attitude at their initial meeting was not very positive. He felt that "she was abrupt."

Within a very short time of this meeting, Ann and Ross were to participate in their first three-way conference in Canada. It was a very negative experience for Ann and her parents. Louise explained:

Within three or four weeks of being here, it was the student-teacher conferences...the interview with her teacher was all negative, not one thing did she say nice about Ann... and Ann was there... We were shown certain bits of work with just red scoring ... this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong, so it was almost like a red piece of paper ... "she's way behind in this, she's way behind in that, no she can't do this, she can't do that," and that was all ... [Ann had been placed, age appropriately, in a middle years classroom]and the teacher told Ann, "You actually have the reading ability of a grade three," very sharp and short like that... I specifically remember really feeling for Ann, and I turned to Ann and said, "But you know what? You've done marvellously, you came

from a different country”... we had to give Ann something positive. There was nothing positive that came from that teacher... absolutely nothing.

Robert agreed the interview was negative. He added:

There wasn't a plan organized for us to help Ann. It just seemed to be, she can't do it and if she doesn't do it, then she'll fall behind and she'll get more homework... and no plan to do anything about it, to address the problems.

According to Louise and Robert, the teacher's body language was also negative. Louise described the event:

The teacher's attitude and body language was almost as if she were too tired to talk... I don't know how to explain the body language, her chin on her hand sort of sloping on the desk [saying], “No this is not good enough, no Ann can't do this, no this is not good enough, she's having difficulty in this, this is too difficult for her” ... it was just all negative, but with the body language, sloped in the desk, chin on the hand ... is not good for a child either.

From Louise and Robert's perspective, the way the teacher conducted the interview, itself, was bullying behaviour. Louise stated:

The behaviour, to me, was almost, would you call it intimidation? I mean how do you tell a child that you're absolutely rubbish, no good at any subject, there's nothing good about you? How can a teacher sit with the parents as well as the child and have nothing positive to say about a child? That to me is bullying, intimidation and totally unacceptable.

After the three-way conference, Louise and Robert continued to monitor the situation. Ann's school world did not seem to improve. Aside from the physical illness and general change in behaviour, other things began to occur. Louise described her daughter's behaviours:

It was the headaches and the tummy aches and not wanting to go to school, which just was not Ann... So within five weeks we'd been to that teacher twice.

Robert remembered other responses as well:

I think it was the crying as well, I mean when she was doing the homework and she just could not figure out the problem solving part of it ... It frustrated her so much that she'd break down into tears... we thought, "there's something definitely wrong here that needs to be addressed," but we'd already got the attitude from this teacher... Something had to be drastically done.

Louise continued to try to work with the teacher to help her daughter adjust. She recalled:

We brought all Ann's background reports, skills reports, special needs reports of being assessed back in the UK, and never once did that teacher indicate that she'd even bothered to read them... In fact, I know she hadn't by certain questions I'd asked her...She said, "Well, I haven't gotten around to that yet," and I'm thinking, if it was me, if I was a teacher, surely you would read it to get an insight about a child that's joining your class that's come from a totally different educational background. She wouldn't even read it to get a hint of where to start... Her words were, "You have to understand I have x amount of pupils and I am very busy"...As a teacher, isn't it part of your job to sort of find out what the issues are, why Ann is behind, why is she failing, why you feel that she is two, or even three, grades behind in some things?

Louise and Robert eventually went to see the principal about Ann's problems in the classroom. Louise described the situation:

I'd actually been to the principal to say that I had been with the teacher, but I felt was there something else we should be doing and again, [the response was], "Well maybe it's too soon." Fortunately, we met some other parents here in Canada and I happened to mention to one of the parents my concerns... It happened to be the right person, his wife was an educator and from this parent, I also heard that other parents had issues with Ann's teacher. So, [our new acquaintance] got his wife to speak to me and advise me what my next move should be, who I should go to next, what I should do next and how to address it.

After Christmas holidays, Louise and Robert met with the principal to insist that Ann be moved to a different class. Not only did they want a different teacher, but they wanted to move her one grade lower so she could keep up with the concepts taught. Louise explained:

We took Ann back a whole year ... [Unfortunately], the issue was never addressed with [the bullying teacher]. It was moving my daughter out of that classroom altogether [and placing her] with a different teacher... that got our little girl back. We got the happy-go-lucky child back that was happy to go to school. The new teacher built up Ann's confidence.

Louise and Robert are still shocked at how quickly their child showed the effects of a bullying teacher. Louise clarified:

Within four weeks of a teacher destroying her confidence, Ann changed from being a very positive person ... It took a while, after going to the new teacher... [for the confidence] to get built back up... How quick was that for a teacher to destroy someone, [to destroy] a child's confidence? She went from a very outgoing little girl ... to very introverted, to not wanting to go out, tummy aches, headaches, crying... you never like to say a child is depressed, but it's my belief that Ann was.

Since her move to the other classroom, Ann has had a very successful Canadian school experience and her skills are now at grade level. Her parents are thrilled with her progress and she is the happy child they knew from before her encounter with her first teacher in Canada. They are still amazed at how much impact a teacher can have on a child. Louise reported:

Well, I find it amazing, one teacher saying everything was negative and you're way behind and no... plan of action ... to another classroom, a different teacher, two and a half years ahead [in her educational growth].

Although Ann appears to have recovered from her experience with a bullying teacher, Louise and Robert are amazed the teacher is still in the classroom. Louise worried:

Interestingly enough, we thought Ann was going to get the same teacher again this year and I remember praying all summer, "Please don't let it be her, please don't let it be her" and yippee, the teacher moved grades and my daughter was not going to get her... Nothing had been done and I suppose it's because of the way the system is... I don't think she should be teaching other children, I really don't.

Robert is surprised the teacher continues to be allowed to teach children. He commented:

I cannot understand Ann's teacher. She is actually teaching younger kids. I can't figure that one out if she is coming out with this attitude...and the amount of complaints that I've heard ... and the other kids that she damaged or knocked their self esteem away from them... I think that it is ridiculous that she's been allowed to carry on.

Looking back, Louise and Robert differ in their feelings about the teacher bullying their children endured. Louise feels guilty for not dealing with the problem sooner. She explained:

I remember ... feeling... almost a failure myself for not protecting my kids enough or not recognizing it quickly. Not so much with Ann, but with Ross, not recognizing it quick enough, not jumping in quick enough and even then, "Oh, okay, where do I go from here, who can I go and talk to?" ... Because you do, you do feel really bad that you've not protected your child.

Robert feels these incidents could be looked upon as learning experiences of life. He remarked:

You cannot molly coddle [your children] all the time. If they come across a problem ... they've got to be able to deal with problems on their own... and not just give it an excuse ... because then they won't face the problems of life.

Louise agrees with her husband to a certain degree, but feels school should not be that difficult for children. She replied:

You quite often see things as a life's lesson. You know, you meet good people and you meet bad people. You learn how to deal with it, yes, I agree with that, but I still don't think a teacher should have that much power over a child.

Although they see the experiences they shared from different perspectives, Robert and Louise both agree that bullying has no place in the classroom. Robert commented, *"It was a pattern of things that affected our children's lives; I mean you can see [the effects]."*

Louise also sees lasting effects for children. She added:

I definitely see that there's a lasting effect...Bullying is a kind of discrimination that really makes you feel ill at ease or uncomfortable. I don't think that's a teacher's job, to make a child feel uncomfortable or ill at ease... when you look at both our kids it wasn't an outburst, it was repetitive, it was ongoing.

Reflection

The stories shared by Louise and Robert came from two very different school environments. Although there are cultural differences, the stories are consistent in many ways. Louise and Robert came to believe Ross was being bullied by his English teacher after meeting the teacher. They also talked to other parents who had similar issues with this particular teacher. The meeting with Ann's teacher was also the catalyst to their perception of teacher bullying. Madsen (1996) found teachers and parents may overlook what students' feel is bullying behaviour. If this is true, parents may not believe the stories shared by their children. As a parent, I always try to have my children look at alternative viewpoints and reasons for actions. Enlisting other opinions may help parents to believe their child's perceptions. Perhaps a child's observation should be taken at face value. It is interesting to note that although Louise and Robert had only recently been through a teacher bullying experience with Ross, they still doubted their intuition with respect to Ann's situation and consulted other parents from the school.

Extremes were also a clue in their parenting puzzle. Ross was getting a lot of detentions, and the teacher's reports about Ross's behaviour in English class were inconsistent with past and present reports from other teachers. In Ann's situation, it was the sudden change in personality and attitude toward school coupled with an unmanageable amount of homework that became a factor in the parents' perceptions.

Both Ann and Ross experienced changes in their behaviour, as they became withdrawn, introverted and easily frustrated. Ann, in particular began to experience physical effects in the form of headaches and stomach aches.

Both of the teachers employed what Louise and Robert perceived as intimidation tactics. Ross's teacher even tried to intimidate Louise through the use of vocabulary which he believed would denigrate her intelligence. Ann's teacher intimated that Ann's skills were so low she would be unable to be successful in her class, thus destroying the child's self-esteem.

Body language was also seen, by the couple, to have sent a strong message about the teachers' attitudes. Ross's teacher physically blocked Louise from entering the school to seek further assistance. Ann's teacher's demeanour presented a sense of apathy and a lack of willingness to find solutions to help their child.

In both situations, Louise and Robert first tried to address the issues with the teacher. Because of their past experiences as a military family, Louise and Robert's expectations were very low. Nonetheless, in both cases, they felt their concerns were not heard or even acknowledged. When they did not find satisfaction, they addressed the issues at the next level. It is interesting to note that in Ross's experience, the issue was never really addressed at all; however, in Ann's case, the parents changed tactics and made demands once they realized nothing was going to change.

I believe this may have happened for two reasons. First, Ross was only affected by his English teacher part of the day: six classes per week as opposed to Ann's experience which was all day, five days per week. The impact of the bullying was much more condensed in Ann's situation and therefore more intervention was deemed necessary.

The second possible reason for their change in tactics is that Louise and Robert had already experienced this scenario and were unwilling to follow to the same conclusion as before. After consulting with other parents, they set the direction and demanded change for their child. This is consistent with Epstein's (1995) theory of overlapping spheres of influence. For Ann, the parents, in consultation with people in the community and the school, were able to find a plausible solution for Ann's problems. If the situation had been left to the school alone, nothing may have been done.

The result of the couple's decision to push their agenda for Ann was successful. Ann recovered and became a happy and productive student. Although Ross's exposure to the bullying teacher was less concentrated, the situation was never resolved. Perhaps this is why Ross, according to his parents, still shows the effects of the bullying in his distrust of people with similar traits and in his reluctance to approach certain teachers for assistance.

Like Tina, Louise feels guilty about leaving her child in a bullying situation as long as she did. She also worries about the possibility of her daughter being placed in this woman's classroom in the future. Also like Tina, Louise states she will not allow the bullying teacher to have power over her child again.

Although Louise and Robert both believe the bullying behaviours of the teachers involved in these stories were never addressed by either school, they do not share the same perceptions of the incidents. Mishna (2004) suggests that defining bullying is difficult because

we each bring individual differences to our perceptions of particular incidents. I believe there are a few possible reasons for the variations in the couple's viewpoints.

First, because Robert was working away from home, Louise was more involved in the first incident. Second, there may be gender perception differences at play. Men and women are socialized differently in our world. Perhaps these gender differences affect our observation and analysis of situations. Third, for Louise, the ghosts (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) from her conflict with Ross's teacher, coupled with her own experiences with teacher bullies as a child, may have coloured her perceptions. Despite the differences, both Robert and Louise labelled the behaviours of the teachers as bullying.

Amy's Story

Amy is the 40 year old mother of a 17 year old boy and a 12 year old girl. At the time in which the stories take place, Amy, a single mother with full custody of the children, was living with her parents in their home. During this time, Amy worked in a school division and attended university.

Amy is now married and has a Master's Degree in Education. She believes that only one of her children has been bullied by a teacher. She shared two separate stories about her oldest child, Jack. The stories Amy shared occurred in a small urban K-8 elementary school of approximately 200 - 220 students. She believes her son, Jack, was bullied by two different teachers during the time he spent at this school.

Too Bright

In grade two, Jack was placed in a classroom which was job-shared by two teachers. After being in the classroom for awhile, Jack started to tell his mother things that didn't seem quite right.

Jack was in a job share classroom, so he had two teachers... One of the teachers covered the math and science core areas and the other teacher taught the literature, arts and spelling... It was the science, math teacher that [was at issue]... I didn't really think Jack was having problems with her, I just thought that there were some really odd stories coming home ...Jack would say things to me like, " Mom, Mrs. so and so doesn't want me to wear my red GAP shirt anymore." Of course, I've worked in schools, so I immediately

think there's some sort of a problem with... gangs or labels, maybe it's not the color red, maybe it's the fact that it's some sort of brand name, maybe it's because GAP can stand for gay and proud... I quizzed him a little bit about it, but of course he's in grade two, so I didn't get very much information anyway... He had no idea why, he just... knew he wasn't supposed to wear [the red shirt].

Amy made a mental note of the conversation and after Christmas, Jack was asked to discontinue wearing another of his shirts.

I got a telephone call at work at my desk from Jack. He was upset because his teacher told him that he wasn't to wear his orange GAP fleece... I thought it was the red GAP shirt that was the problem. Jack said, "No, this [time it] is my [orange] fleece" ... [The shirt] had a little tiny [embroidered GAP logo] ...it was orange on orange ... embroidered onto fleece...Jack said [his teacher told him] that [the shirt] was distracting her when she tried to teach. [She said] that she has a lot on her mind and that when she looked out and she saw lots of colors like that, it was very distracting.

Amy considered calling the teacher, but decided to avoid an issue by having her son wear other colours.

Armed with the information about the red shirt before Christmas and now the orange shirt, I thought really, at the time, I should phone and address it with [the teacher], but that perhaps it wouldn't really get anywhere if those were her feelings... I didn't want to make trouble... So I just decided to avoid those shirts and maybe avoid bright colors for a while because, quite frankly, we had enough clothes...he could wear something else and I could just put him in his navy, black and brown stuff like every other kid. If what Jack told me is true, then I'm not dealing with somebody with whom I really want to get into it, I don't maybe want to mix it up with somebody who ...is maybe so disturbed that they don't like colors in the classroom ... You're teaching grade two and you don't like orange and red? Explain that.

As the year went on there were other small issues involving Jack, but one incident, near the end of January, was very upsetting to both Amy and her son.

The next thing I knew, Jack got sent home with a note. He was very disturbed, distraught actually. He was crying because he had been accused of stealing the [teacher's] Sticky Tack, you know the stuff on the walls.

The note from the teacher said that all of the children had told her Jack was responsible for the theft, so Amy and her mother questioned Jack to find out what was going on.

I pressed him you know, a few times and Grandma and I kind of tag teamed like good parents would... I said, "Well I have a lot of Sticky Tack at home... why, why would you take Sticky Tack?" and he said, "I didn't. We have a lot of it at home, there's no reason for me to take Sticky Tack." It was pretty apparent to us that he hadn't taken the Sticky Tack ... You get to the point with your kids where you have to believe them and you have to take their side about something...

Amy's instincts and experience as a parent told her Jack was telling the truth.

I love Sticky Tack and I use it on everything and I've got posters all over the kids' bedroom walls and you know, he never has a problem, he's never taken the Sticky Tack off of his walls and played with it. Jack was a very tactile child, but he didn't enjoy Silly Putty and he didn't enjoy Play Dough... My parental... instinct was telling me that he hadn't really bothered with the Sticky Tack. [Maybe] if he would have played with it at home. I had ... the packages in my drawers; he had ready access to it. I had enough problems with regular kid stuff, telling him to put down other [things], but I certainly never had to deal with the Sticky Tack.

At this point, Amy consulted with guidance counselors she knew from the school system where she worked.

So now we've had a couple of incidents. We've had a couple of playground incidents, which I felt as a parent I had handled well because Jack was made to apologize. I certainly didn't let him slither out of anything. And then we had the coloured clothing incident and that had seemed odd, but I had obviously filed it into my mind for future reference. And now we've got the Sticky Tack incident. So I decided, after talking... with the guidance counsellors at work ...that I should address [the issues] with the teacher... so armed with that little bit of confidence, I thought I would give this woman a call.

Amy called Jack's teacher and was astonished with her response.

I spoke to her and she was completely irrational... I said, "I just feel like I have to follow up with you about this because I talked to Jack and I really don't think that he's taken the Sticky Tack. I can assure you that if he did take the Sticky Tack, I would be the first person that would make him repay and he would have to ... make amends..." Then the woman accused me of aiding and abetting the theft of Sticky Tack. I said, "Didn't you hear me? I have a plethora of Sticky Tack of my own." To which her response was, "And where did it come from? It probably came from my classroom." I said, "Well, this isn't really going anywhere. I'm wondering if maybe we shouldn't get together face to face and talk about it" and she said, "Oh yea, we'll get together face to face. You'll come and talk to me in my classroom and we'll talk about your kid and you won't leave standing."

Amy felt uneasy meeting this teacher alone, so she tried to have the principal, with whom she already had a rapport, join them. Unfortunately, the principal was not available, so she arranged the conference with the vice-principal, whom she had not met.

So now I've been accused of being a Sticky Tack theft accomplice and I have been threatened... I called the administrator at the school... and it was agreed that there would be a three way meeting between myself, the classroom teacher and the vice-principal... [Unfortunately], it wouldn't be the principal because I had very good rapport with the principal. So I was a little anxious going into this [meeting] with the vice-principal.

The meeting did not go well. Amy felt intimidation tactics were used by the teacher and vice principal.

So I went to this meeting and, looking back on it, it was a gong show from start to finish... I was ushered into the classroom and they made me sit in a little chair... They sat in the seats of the desk or on the tables of the desks, sitting higher than me physically and I was intimidated. Of course at this point... I'm [not yet a teacher]and ... I'm going through University... Jack is my first child, my other [child] isn't even in Kindergarten yet, so I'm kind of a newbie...I'm a single mom and, of course, working ... at a high school, I know that before this meeting, they've flipped through [Jack's records], maybe they've made some sort of judgment, single mother...maybe they've made some sort of

judgment about my living situation, but I go into the meeting with good faith and I'm going to talk this out. I'm still maintaining that my child is not a Sticky Tack thief.

Even though she felt intimidated, Amy felt some of the issues needed to be addressed with Jack's teacher.

I don't remember [everything]... it is a long time ago now, because my son is now in grade twelve. I don't remember the ins and outs of the conversation, but I remember the vice-principal being completely on the offensive and not having any skills at all in mediating a dispute between a parent and a teacher if that's what you can call it... I certainly went in there with good faith, but ... I was prepared ... with both guns, my both barrels were loaded because she has called me a thief and she has told me that I won't leave her room standing ... I [planned] to address both of those statements in this meeting with the vice-principal because those [statements] should not [have been] uttered...that's not professional language.

The vice principal and teacher minimized Amy's concerns. Amy felt her side of the story was never really taken seriously.

The vice-principal really towered over me and the way he spoke to me was like [he was] speaking to a kid that was in trouble... Even when I returned to my original observation, which was, "If my child did steal it, I will make him pay it back, I'm not here to get him off the hook," ... the vice-principal basically said, "Well, then why are you here if you're not here to get him off the hook?" I said, "I'm here because of the incredibly distasteful conversation that this teacher and I had on the telephone, where she accused me of being an accomplice [to theft] ... and she threatened me ... that was a very threatening comment, "Come to my classroom and talk to me about it and...you won't leave standing"... Of course, she completely denies this comment about "you won't leave standing" and she twisted it up into a completely different phrase... Of course, it's all my miscommunication now right? ... And then I said, "Well then let's just address this bit about Jack being a thief and me being a thief as well." She said, "I would like to know where all the Sticky Tack ... in your house came from"... and I said, "It came from Staples." But she, of course, wouldn't take this at face value at all. She was still clinging to the idea that I might be in possession of some of her Sticky Tack, which just completely

frosted me... It came out actually towards the end of the school year that some other little boy actually had taken it.

The meeting ended without any of the issues resolved.

Amy was very upset with the results of the meeting so she wrote to one of the superintendents of the school and actually received an answer.

I wrote a letter to the superintendent about the situation with the teacher and he phoned me at my desk at work, which I also thought was an interesting way for him to handle it and probably a good move... I didn't feel satisfied because he just maintained the status quo, but he heard me right? I felt heard.

Amy feels it was fortunate that Jack only saw this teacher half of the week. She believes the other teacher in this job share was a more nurturing person who felt obligated to compensate for the days when she was not with the children.

The other teacher in the job share situation ... seemed very nice... When I spoke with her, it seemed almost like she was overcompensating for the other teacher's behaviour... What was very interesting was the reports that Jack gave about everything to do with school. He reported a very different classroom [with this teacher] ... [but] when the Sticky Tack obsessed lady... [the] teacher who was blinded by the light of the GAP sweatshirt, when she was around, it was really ... different and you could see there was different pallor in his mood when he came home from her at the end of the day.

Unfortunately, the classroom situation changed, and the teachers, who had each worked half the day, changed the schedule to full two and one half days per week.

[Each teacher] ended up doing two and a half days... which became problematic for us. If you're sending a child in a situation where you think ... half the time every day he's going to be with this person that's not bothering him as much, but then it ends up being these big chunks of time [with the bullying teacher], it's really difficult.

As time passed, Jack's behaviour changed even more dramatically.

I could see the days when she was in the classroom ... I remember it being sort of the Wednesday afternoon, all day Thursday, all day Friday... By Friday evening, he was

really disconnected, really unhappy, really tired out ... perfectly willing to go back to school on Monday though, but then, of course, he started having the stomach aches.

Jack began to feel sick on Wednesdays at lunch time.

The mystery stomach aches ... always happened Wednesday at noon hour. For the rest of the year, we had this incredible malady that came on Wednesday at noon hour and usually Thursday morning, Friday morning and I have to admit that after [awhile], I perceived it to be laughable, but also horrible at the same time... But, there's only so much a girl can do... so I just really have to say that I threw up my hands and I said, "You know it's only grade two... there's not a lot that he's going to miss that's going to prevent him from pursuing a career or becoming an active member of society if he misses school periodically on Wednesday afternoons, all day Thursday and all day Friday.

As a working, single mother, Amy did what she needed to do for her child, but she's not sure it was the best choice.

I tended to pull the plug on school and I think that in hindsight ... that wasn't the right thing to do ... I think that it probably didn't send a good message to [Jack]... There's definitely a good side to removing yourself from a situation where you're being bullied. That is a good strategy. On the other hand, it's not teaching a child any coping skills.

Jack continued to have problems with the teacher. She never phoned Amy with issues; they, instead, began communicating with letters. The teacher had Jack read each note before he brought it home.

She would send these long winded notes home in this gargantuan primary school writing about what Jack had done that day... I think that's the only way she knew to communicate... I think [this teacher] was probably two or three years away from [retirement] at this point. She had only ever taught primary school [I believe], and I really think she didn't know how to communicate with adults... I think she made [Jack] read the letter before he came home and I think it was supposed to put some fear into him before he presented it to me.

The teacher continued to send home notes about Jack's misdemeanours. Some of them were rather bizarre.

For instance, on whacky hair day that year I used gel and of course he's got a little boy's short hair cut, and I divided his hair into grids and then I gelled it and then on the tip of each one of those spikes I put beads. It's whacky hair day, let's roll with it. Anyway, he came home with a letter that said his hair was too tall and that the boy behind him couldn't see the board.

Although it was a difficult year, Jack managed to survive through avoidance. Throughout the year, Amy tried to maintain a good rapport with the other teacher in the classroom.

At the elementary level [teachers are] always asking parents to come and help out for things. I never [helped] the bullying teacher, but I did make myself available for the other half time teacher in the room. I felt that building a good rapport with her would probably help Jack, but it would also, in a way, undermine any negativity that there could be between the other teacher and me. At least one of the teachers would see me as a rational, reasonable person. I didn't know what this teacher's job situation was and I wondered if she was finding the [bullying] teacher to be as irrational to teach with as I was finding her.

Amy believes the teacher's bullying of Jack was targeted and overt. Although she understands teachers are people and may prefer one type of student from another, she feels this teacher's response to Jack was bizarre.

I think [the bullying behaviours] were overt and I think they were unfounded... They confounded me because I could see taking a dislike to a child because since then, I've become a teacher and I honestly have had students that I disliked... I don't think that that's uncommon... but when I step back now... with time and more knowledge on my side... and some education, I wonder what was so unlikeable about this little gaffer? [Why did she take] everything to heart? [Why was it so] upsetting for her? I wasn't really active enough with a parent group or with any other parents or with the home and school to really communicate with anyone else and find out if that was also happening with other children, but I think it would have been interesting to know ... This is my theory: if the infractions are just simple things like the color of shirt you wear or how tall your hair was on whacky hair day, then you are going to have those problems with more than one child.

The Boys by the Tree

The second story shared by Amy occurred in the same school with a different administrator. Her son was now in grade eight and the teacher, who Amy perceived bullied her son, Jack, was his homeroom teacher and cross country track coach. Amy described this teacher as a stern individual who was close to retirement.

Jack's teacher was in his mid to late fifties, also very close to retirement. It was commonly known that he was a very grumpy, angry man and that he had a very short fuse that he would go off at a moment's notice.

Jack did not have any difficulty with his teacher regarding academics; it was the teacher's comments to Jack that became an issue.

Jack loved cross country running and his classroom teacher was also the cross country running coach. He stayed every day after school for cross country and one day he came home with the most shocking little story. He found it amusing; he didn't find that it was a bullying [situation]. This teacher was hustling all the boys in after cross country that day and when they came into the school he said to them, "You were all running really slowly today and you were slow coming into the school. You were all running like a bunch of fairies"... Jack thought this was funny because he had never heard the word fairy used in that context before. He was thinking of a fairy with a wand... I realized at that moment that being raised by a single Mom and a Grandma and a Grandfather that you live a really sheltered life. Unless you're out on the playground with a lot of unsupervised time, you don't hear a lot of slang and you don't hear a lot of negative homophobic slurs or racial slurs, so he just thought this was hilarious.

Amy realized it was time to educate her son about the importance of language.

I explained sort of how important word usage was and how I cannot abide by derogatory remarks. [I explained that] this is why we don't use language like that in the home. [I also stressed that] this is the type of language I want you to be aware of because, and this was my point, there are homosexual people in our family and in our close circle of friends, and we will not speak derogatorily about them.

Armed with his new found awareness, Jack was soon reporting other incidents.

He came home from school a little while later and he reported to me that this time they had been goofing around in a classroom and the teacher told them they were acting like a bunch of homos. [I wondered] if there been anything else said since our discussion about word usage and slang, so I quizzed Jack about it. He and his three good buddies always stood under [a certain tree on the playground], they met under that tree because they were in different classrooms, and that was their tree. It was the tree across the street from the house where these kids grew up. They knew to go to the tree, they even left notes for each other on the tree and messages and stuff. Jack said, "We were all talking on the playground and the teacher said, 'You're always huddled around that tree. Are you planning a tryst or a get together? You boys are always under that tree, are you a bunch of homos?'" When I finally got this story out of Jack, I was just completely appalled.

The inappropriate language became more apparent as the year progressed.

They were repetitive comments. They were outside of the classroom, they were inside of the classroom and it just kept happening. Then, as the year went on, there were more of them and it became apparent to me that Jack and these other couple of boys were really being targeted. So one day, I finally decided to take matters into my own hands.

Amy was not as reluctant to approach the school with her concerns as she was six years earlier. She had grown in confidence for a number of reasons.

It was a completely different me [from the first incident]. I had graduated with my Bachelors degree in Education, I had been out teaching and I had won the Bates Award. I was going into graduate school and I was getting re-married. It was a completely different time of my life. I was not so easily intimidated and definitely not scared, not of a teacher because I didn't see them at all as authority figures now.

Amy was not about to be intimidated or bullied in an interview again. She decided to control the meeting.

Looking back on it, I was quite shameful. I knew that he was an elderly man and I knew that there were obviously sex/gender issues simmering on the pot because otherwise it wouldn't be coming home in the form of all these comments. So, I decided to squeeze the pimple to see what comes out. So I put on ammunition to go and visit the teacher. I do

recall putting on a pencil thin black skirt and really tall black hooker boots, and a skinny black blouse. Of course that was the day that I wore my long blonde hair down.

Amy did not make an appointment because she did not want anyone to plan for her arrival.

This time I didn't make an appointment to talk to the teacher. I felt that last time I'd been usurped simply by doing what I felt was right, which was contacting administration. Last time [in grade 2], the administration became involved in the situation and they acted not as a mediator, but as an advocate for the teacher. They double tag teamed me and basically wrote me off. This time, I wasn't going to let that happen. This time, I decided to just go in unannounced. I went one day after school when I knew there was no cross country.

Amy was determined to be in control this time and she set the stage with her entrance.

I knew the teacher would be sitting at his desk in his classroom and I walked in and I may have slammed the door so that he would look up from his desk on the other side of the room and there I was standing there in all of my golden glory.

The meeting was very confrontational, one-sided and riddled with emotion.

It was very confrontational, but it was very one sided and I didn't let him get a word in. I basically told him, I bullied him and I remember that he tried to speak up a couple of times in a very meek and mousy mild way... "Just a minute, if I can explain that comment"... and I shut him down. I wouldn't let him explain the comments at all because I was pissed and the comments are completely unacceptable, so there is no explanation that can wash them away.

The first teacher that I encountered in the bullying situation was able to explain away some of her comments by rephrasing things and chalking it up to my misunderstanding, but here there was no misunderstanding. I said, "If even half of what my child says is true, what you are saying is bullying, it's sexual harassment, it's completely inappropriate... it's inappropriate for your profession, for your age, for your station, for your situation of being in charge of children."

I propped my arms on the desk and I leaned over him and it was one of those days ...when I've gotten so agitated and so frustrated about something and I've taken it out on one person in a sort of a stream of consciousness, a lightening bolt of verbs and adjectives and nouns that just get more and more and more riddled with intensity and I just took the guy out.

My parting words were, "If my child comes home with even one comment that you'd said this or that or the word homo or fairy or gay or faggot crosses your lips around my kid, even if he hears you talking about other kids, I will be having this conversation with the Director of Education." The way that I walked into this classroom and announced myself today is the way that I would go into his office and announce myself. By that time, I'd worked around enough schools that I could drop a few names and legitimate names because I knew these people... When I left the room, I'm pretty sure he was lying in the foetal position chewing on his hairpiece.

Although Amy is not proud of her response, she feels her choice of action, this time, was more effective.

The teacher just backed right down, but it was obvious to me that he needed to be told and he needed to be told in that way or it wasn't going to stop. I suspect that if I had gone to the administrator about the situation, it probably would've gone by the way of some sort of administrative shuffle and kind of been swept under the rug. [The type of bullying was] so loaded and it was borderline sexual harassment. [If I had gone to the administrator], I would never have had the opportunity to nip that in the bud, and I really do feel like I nipped that in the bud. I honestly [don't think he ever spoke to anyone like that again]. I think he was close to tears when I left the classroom that day. He was absolutely convinced that I was going to take it further and that it was just a simple matter of my whim, my mood. [I think he believed that] if he stepped out of line and I got wind of it, then his whole career would come crashing down.

Amy has had other interactions with teachers she would characterize as bullies in her work in schools prior to becoming a teacher.

When I was a [staff member at a school], I met a teacher that bullied kids... He was in his late fifties and he was physically unwell. He had a short fuse, which everybody sort of

wrote off to the fact that he was diabetic... He was completely irrational actually and he couldn't get along with the other staff members either. He and I had to work together on a couple of very important projects for the school and he could only be nice until somebody made a mistake. The mistake could be really small, a minor infraction. Then, it was like he would just lose his mind. I always thought it funny for a person with that personality trait to become a teacher. People make mistakes, especially when they're learning.

While Amy worked on the project with this teacher, she made a mistake and learned, first hand, about this teacher's wrath.

It was interesting because it was probably somewhere in-between the time that I had the problem with Jack's grade two teacher and the grade eight teacher. I think it was probably a really big learning curve for me. He went off on me in front of students. I had basically compiled a list for him of kids that could be considered for an award at graduation...and I left off a kid who, I guess, should have been on the list. At this point, we're only making the list. It's not a big deal, just add her and move on. This teacher came into my office and he was ranting and raving about me being incompetent and did it in front of students. When he left, the students started laughing and I just felt horrible. I wondered why they were laughing and they told me that he's like that all the time. That's just the way he is in class. He was a total joke among the students. He had such a bad temper and it was commonly known, too, that he would take a dislike to particular kids and ride them until they dropped the class. In high school, particularly an inner city high school, students just drop, they ditch, or they don't attend. If they can, they go and see a guidance counsellor and change to another section; they'll change their schedule.

I started watching what the interactions were for this teacher. Because I was getting more education, the principal was giving me more responsibility This was an inner city school and we had pregnancies and drug use... oh, we had all of it. [My job had evolved]. I [was given the responsibility] to change schedules and to help with scholarship applications. The school actually brought in another [staff person], so that half of the time I could work out of like a little office in the back. I met with kids and it was mostly about this person.

The school knew this teacher was a problem, but nobody seemed to want to take a stand.

Guidance already knew about this teacher. So, I went and spoke to the administrator about this teacher who basically said, “You know, he’s a year and a half away from retirement. When he goes, he goes. He might even do his last year on sick leave. Let’s not... rock the boat because it’s not going to help.”

Amy does not agree with how the school and school board handled this teacher.

I think that this teacher should have been removed from the classroom and receive counselling. Put him on a paid leave, who cares, but he should be out of the classroom and should have no student contact time until a counsellor has agreed that he is fit to be put back into the classroom.

Reflection

Amy shared three stories. The first two stories about her son, Jack were from the perspective of a parent, the third, as a staff member in a school system. Amy feels her shared recollections may be somewhat inaccurate from the time they were experienced because she has since become more educated and knowledgeable about the workings of a school. She is also a veteran as a parent with school age children. Although she was quite introspective during the interview, Amy’s tone of voice and body language demonstrated there may be underlying emotion attached to these events.

In all three instances of perceived teacher bullying, it was the stories shared by the student that alerted Amy to the potential issue. Her son’s stories in grade two seemed incredulous at first, but after speaking with the teacher, Amy experienced first hand what seemed to be an unusual sense of reality. In this instance, Jack’s physical and emotional malaise also contributed to Amy’s belief there was an issue with the teacher.

In grade eight, Jack’s stories were enough to convince his mother there were problems. The sexual and socially inappropriate language choices of the teacher were disturbing enough for Amy to take action without needing other evidence to support her conclusion. As for her incident as a staff member, having personally experienced the intimidating anger of the teacher, Amy readily believed the stories of the students because they echoed her interaction with the man.

Amy believes the grade two teacher's behaviour was bullying. Jack was intimidated by the teacher, who also used this tactic with Amy. She was accusatory and threatening. She punished Jack by having him read aloud letters of complaint to his mother. Amy feels the actions of the teacher were targeted.

The grade eight teacher's comments to Jack and his friends were definitely not politically correct. Amy intimated it was the repetitive and targeted nature of the remarks that signaled the issue.

The situation in the high school was also targeted toward certain students. Amy describes both the grade two teacher and the high school teacher as irrational. This word choice echoes Louise's comment about the teacher in England. Louise also used the term irrational to describe her son's teacher.

Amy's response to the three situations varies. The occurrences are chronologically as follows: grade two, high school and grade eight. During this time, Amy was learning more about schools through her education and she was growing in confidence as a professional and as a parent.

Tina and Amy had similar strategies in dealing with their son's physical response to the situation. Both of the children stayed at home to avoid the teacher. This also enabled the mothers to avoid the situation, both at home with their child and at the school. Amy also avoided speaking with the grade two teacher by communicating with notes. Like the other parents, Amy met with the teacher first and only moved up the "chain of command" when nothing was accomplished.

A few years later, as a school staff member and now a university student, Amy kept track of student complaints about the "bullying" teacher. She spoke to guidance counselors regarding this man, and when she realized their hands were tied, she discussed the issue with the administration of the high school.

By the time her son was in grade eight, Amy had completed her Bachelor of Education degree and was beginning graduate studies with the College of Education. She had experienced two perceived bullying situations and was faced with a third. Her response to this situation was very aggressive. This time, Amy did not politely make an appointment to speak with the teacher.

She made specific demands and gave the teacher no opportunity to dismiss or rephrase the remarks. She explained her intention of taking action with administration if the behaviour continued.

The results of Amy's actions in the first two incidents were a minimization of her concerns. She felt the grade two teacher and the vice-principal manipulated her intentions and belittled her as a parent. Although Amy was frustrated with the response of the school, the superintendent phoned her in response to her letter and although nothing was accomplished, she felt validated because she was heard.

It is interesting to note the response of the teacher's job-share partner. Amy feels this teacher made compensations for the "bullying" teacher. This echoes my experience. While sharing a classroom with a teacher, who I believed was bullying certain students, I too compensated for this teacher. After I realized that administration would do nothing to improve the conditions for the class, I did what I could for the children by reducing the workload for the targeted students and trying to intervene on their behalf when possible.

In the situation at the high school, Amy's concerns were discussed with administration. Rather than acting, the administration chose to wait for the man to retire or go on sick leave. This response echoes my situation as well. I was informed by my principal that the teacher only had a few more years to go, so nothing would be done. As professionals, it is hard to stand by and watch while a colleague destroys the confidence of students in your school. Yet, we have protocols and codes of ethics which bind our actions. I believe to step outside the sometimes "unwritten" expectations, we risk our reputations and our chances for advancement.

By the time Amy was dealing with her son's grade eight teacher, the ghosts (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) from the other incidents were also in play. Amy was not willing to be set aside again and the insecurities she felt in those earlier years had been replaced by confidence, through formal education and life's lessons. Although Amy's response to Jack's grade 8 teacher was aggressive in nature, it did achieve for her, the desired result. Her son did not report any inappropriate comments from the teacher for the remainder of the year. The problem appeared to have gone. It is interesting to note this was the only situation from this study where the teacher was directly confronted regarding specific bullying behaviours.

Amy differentiated the high school experience of teacher bullying with elementary school. She feels the impact on the student in high school is not as extreme because the students can avoid the teacher more easily. If a high school student avoids one teacher's class, they may have to repeat one class only. They are still involved with positive educators and their peers. If an elementary school child avoids the teacher, they miss a large part of their year of education and peer interaction.

Throughout the interview process, Amy commented about her growth as a person. She recognized her insecurities about the perceived bias of the school and cites school records, staff interaction and her home/ family situation as possible reasons for pre-judgment. Amy may have had good reason to feel uncomfortable because some educators may have a notion that parents do not know what is good for their children, educationally (Nicholson, Evans, Tellier-Robinson and Aviles, 2001). As Amy's level of education increased, so did her confidence. She also cites the fact that she was soon to be married as another reason for her self-assurance. Human beings are riddled with insecurities for many reasons. How many parents are not engaging with the school because they feel inadequate themselves or feel that schools pre-judge?

Summary

This chapter narrated and reflected upon the stories shared by the parent participants in this study. To honour their contributions, each person was asked to read and affirm both the related story and my reflection on it. Chapter five looks at the themes that emerged from the stories with respect to the original research questions.

Chapter Five:

Connections

This chapter presents themes derived from the opinions and perceptions of the participants, not already discussed in the reflections following the individual stories. These themes have been organized according to the original research questions which have been restructured as follows:

1. How did the parents come to believe their child was being bullied by a teacher?
2. What were the specific behaviours of the teacher that were perceived by parents as bullying?
3. How did the parents respond to the belief that their child was being bullied by a teacher?
4. What was the result of the parental response and what are the implications for teacher practice and education?

The literature has been linked to the emerging themes from the participants' experiences where available.

1. How did the parents come to believe their child was being bullied by a teacher?

The parents in this study came to a gradual belief that a teacher was bullying their child. Although the situations and chronology differed, the following themes were similar in all three families' situations: first impressions of the teacher, the need for validation from others regarding their perceptions, and their child's response to the situation.

First Impressions

Parents' first impressions of their child's teacher were important to their eventual belief regarding teacher bullying. All of the participants talked about their first real experience with the teacher as important in their examination of the issues. In Tina's situation with the track coach,

she was open to the possibility that her son misunderstood. Discussing the problem with the coach helped her to believe her child. Larry's teacher made a first impression with Tina at Meet the Teacher Night. She commented, *"All of us, basically, picked our jaws up off the floor because it was crazy."*

In Louise and Robert's situation, first impressions were also a key to their belief. Louise and Robert believed their son, Ross, was having issues with another student. Louise stated, *"It was only through investigating that issue and meeting with the teacher that we realized Ross was being bullied by that teacher."* Ann's teacher also presented a negative impression for the family, who described her lethargic body language and negativity.

In Amy's situation, her first real encounter with Jack's grade two teacher was what she characterized as an irrational telephone call, which included accusations and threats. In her role as a staff member, Amy felt very uncomfortable soon after meeting the high school teacher with whom she later had issues. Amy commented, *"This teacher came into my office and he was ranting and raving about me being incompetent and did it in front of students."*

Million (2002) discusses a number of ways for teachers to improve communication with parents. She interviewed a variety of administrators for their ideas. She writes:

First impressions can make or break parent-teacher relationships. "One thing I stress," says Montana principal John Moffat, "is the first seven seconds of an initial meeting. This is how long it takes to make a first impression. If it's positive, research shows that even negative incidents later won't replace the first positive image. Conversely, if that impression is negative, even a great deal of positive follow-up generally won't overcome it." (p. 5)

Witmer (2005) recognizes parent-teacher relationships affect parents' judgments of their children's education. She comments, "Parents often form their opinions about the quality of a whole school based on their relationship with their child's teacher" (p. 225). Perhaps the parents in this study would have been less likely to believe their child was being bullied if the teachers in these situations had behaved differently or presented a more positive and lasting first impression.

Validation

Hopkins (2006) suggests first impressions are not the only clue parents rely upon to formulate an opinion about their child's teacher. He interviewed a number of administrators who felt parents also put faith in their child's comments and other parents' opinions.

"How parents feel after first meeting a teacher means an awful lot," agreed Principal Les Potter, but he said in truth parents are more influenced by soft impressions – including other parents' opinions... (p. 2)

Before the participants in this study were willing to believe their children were being bullied or to take action, the parents seemed to need support from others. All of the parents interviewed felt validated by others' opinions. It is as if they needed to check their perceptions. Tina knew other parents' children had similar issues with Larry's teacher. Louise and Robert found out they were not alone in the situation with Ross's teacher as well. Louise said, "*I found this out by getting together and general chit-chat with other parents.*" Once in Canada, Louise and Robert consulted with a number of parents, as they looked for a course of action. Amy did not talk to other parents in the community. Her validation came from colleagues. She discussed the issues and asked for advice from this trusted source.

This need for validation should not be surprising because our society is based on a system of validation. The legal system is built upon the concept that a person is innocent until proven guilty. Proof is needed to assess truth. We ask for references for job applicants, and rely on the opinions of others to help us determine the worth of art, movies or books.

Parents who do not have access to support in their school community may look to other sources for validation. Bullying related web sites, chat rooms and online journals provide a venue for parents to discuss their issues. These resources may have become popular because they help parents to make decisions and check their perceptions.

This need for validation among parents in school communities has become even more apparent as the participants, and other parents with whom I have spoken, are anxious to see the outcome of this study. They want to see if there are similarities in their stories and if the literature supports their perceptions.

Children's Responses to Perceived Bullying Behaviours of Teachers

Noonan and Renihan (2005) cite Heward (2003) regarding parental involvement in their children's education. Heward comments that parents know their children and their needs. Parents have been consistently present throughout their children's educational lives and want to see them succeed.

Maples (2007) feels "parents are the ultimate experts when it comes to knowing their children" (p. 21). She describes a personal experience as a classroom educator when she devised an interesting solution to reach out to parents in her community. Maples asked all of the parents of her students to write an essay describing their child and was astounded by the response.

The return rate was only the first shock; I was completely unprepared for what my parents had taken time to tell me about their children. This assignment was an instance when quantity meant quality. They were funny, sad, hopeful, and proud. Most parents felt impassioned to share details about their children's personalities, which gave me a deeper insight into who it was that I would teach that year. (p. 22)

Maples reinforces Heward's (2003) comments. Parents know their children. It seems to follow parents would also be aware when their children are responding to their school environment in an atypical way. Because parents have seen their children's responses to a variety of teachers and settings, they would likely notice when their child is not responding positively to the classroom environment.

Although the ages and circumstances of the children in this study varied, their responses to the perceived teacher bullying had many parallels:

- The children talked to their parents and shared stories.
- The children experienced physical issues such as stomach aches and headaches.
- The children's avoidance of the school environment was common, often through illness.
- Parents noticed the depressed attitude or change in personality of their children.
- The children withdrew from family, friends and activities.
- The children expressed feelings of frustration and anxiety.

- The children spent time crying about school or the teacher.
- The children exhibited low self-esteem.

These findings are consistent with the effects of bullying on children described by Aluedse (2006).

Persistent bullying may erode a victim's self confidence [and] induce serious health problems.... [Other symptoms may include] headaches, sleeplessness, anxiety and depression. Some may even develop post-traumatic stress disorder. (p. 41)

Aluedse also states, "Victims of bullying could often become identifiable because they become moody, irritable, frustrated, or act tired and withdrawn" (p. 41). She further comments that "[t]he sense of powerlessness experienced by children who are victimized can be so profound that some victims of bullying react with self-destructive acts or lethal retaliation" (p. 41).

The effects of bullying outlined by Aluedse (2006) clearly echo the parents' perceptions of the children's responses to their educational experience. The parents who participated in this study attribute their child's response to issues in the classroom, and more specifically to the behaviours of the teachers. McEachern, Aluedse and Kenny (2008) also describe similar symptoms in children who have been bullied by a teacher. These include physical symptoms, withdrawal, avoidance, depression, worry, crying and sleep issues (see table 1).

There were a number of factors which contributed to the participant parents' beliefs that their child was being bullied by a teacher. Their children all displayed symptoms consistent with those described by the literature for both bullying and, more specifically, teacher bullying. These symptoms, coupled with the parents' first impressions of the teacher, directed them toward their conclusions, yet all of the parents needed confirmation from others before their suspicions became a belief.

Table 1*Comparison of Symptoms of Teacher Bullying in Children*

Participant description	Description
as cited by McEachern et al (2008)*	
Shared stories with parents	
Physical issues such as stomach aches and headaches	Physical symptoms including headaches and stomach aches
Avoidance of the school environment, often through illness	School avoidance
Depressed attitude or change in personality	Depression
Withdrawal from family, friends and activities	Withdrawal behaviour
Feelings of frustration and anxiety	
Crying about school or the teacher	Worry about classroom performance, fear of teachers, excessive crying
Low self-esteem	Low self-esteem
	Sleep disturbances

* The description of behaviours of children described by Krugman and Krugman (1984) is cited in McEachern et al (2008).

2. What were the specific behaviours of the teacher that were perceived by parents as bullying?

The participants in this study addressed a number of teacher behaviours which they considered to be bullying behaviours. In isolation, the parents did not perceive any one act to be bullying in nature. It was a combination or repetition of the behaviour that was at issue. The following outlines some of the teacher behaviours described by the participants:

- Seemingly irrational responses
- Erratic behaviours
- Outbursts of anger
- Unsubstantiated punishment or accusations
- Use of homework as punishment
- Inflexibility
- Apathy
- Negative or hurtful comments
- Disregard for the student
- Ignoring the student
- Inappropriate language or comments
- Belittling behaviours
- Labeling
- Power and control issues

The definition of teacher bullying chosen for this study is as follows: “a pattern of conduct, rooted in a power differential that threatens, harms, humiliates, induces fear, or causes emotional distress” (McEvoy, 2005, p. 1). Although the behaviours were very different for each incident described, the parents believed a pattern was established, and their child was adversely affected. As teachers of the children, the power differential was clearly established. Parsons

(2003) states, “The power imbalance is clear: adults direct and students obey” (p. 39). Louise comments, “*There’s no match. It’s a child and an adult.*”

McEachern, Aluedse and Kenny (2008) describe emotionally abusive behaviours from teachers in a classroom setting. They comment:

Emotional maltreatment and abuse have typically been associated with dysfunctional family systems rather than a phenomenon that can occur and be observed in school settings. However, for some children, the school is the first place where they may experience emotional abuse. (p. 3)

Table 2 illustrates the parallels between the participants’ perceptions of teacher bullying behaviours and the conduct described by McEachern, Aluedse and Kenny (2008) as emotionally abusive behaviours of teachers.

Table 2*Comparison of Teacher Bullying Behaviours*

Parental perceptions	Description
by McEachern et al (2008)	
Seemingly irrational responses	Intimidating behaviours
Outbursts of anger	Screaming at the children
Unsubstantiated punishment or accusations	Use of homework as punishment
Inflexibility	
Apathy	
Negative or hurtful comments	Discriminating, prejudicial and biased
Disregard for the student	Distancing and emotionally nonsupportive
Ignoring the student	
Inappropriate language or comments	Harassment
Erratic behaviours	Destabilizing, inconsistent and erratic behaviours
Belittling behaviours	Verbal putdowns, demeaning behaviours
Labelling	Labelling
Power and control issues	Dominating or controlling behaviours

Most of the teachers in the participants' stories had been teaching for a number of years or were nearing retirement. As a parent and educator, many of my experiences with teachers, who I would characterize as bullies, have also been teachers with years of experience. This observation brought me to a question: Could teacher behaviours perceived by others as bullying in nature be a symptom of stress or burnout? According to Eastman (1996),

Burnout affects all professions but tends to be more pervasive in the human service occupations such as education. Burnout symptoms include: dissatisfaction, negativism, boredom, unpreparedness, testiness, frequent illness, forgetfulness, depression and tiredness. (p. 6)

Table 3 looks at the parallels between the perceived bullying behaviours of the teachers in this study and teacher stress/burnout symptoms. Although there may be a connection between these symptoms and bullying behaviours, it is not possible to determine whether the perceived teacher behaviours described by the parents in this study can be attributed to stress or burnout.

Table 3*Parallels between Perceived Bullying Behaviours and Teacher Burnout*

Parental perceptions	Symptoms of teacher stress or burnout*
Seemingly irrational responses	Anxiety
Outbursts of anger	Testiness, anger, frustration
Unsubstantiated punishment or accusations	
Inflexibility	
Apathy	Boredom, unpreparedness, depression, fatigue
Negative or hurtful comments	Negativism
Disregard for the student	Avoidance of students, reduction in commitment to students, forgetfulness
Ignoring the student	
Inappropriate language or comments	
Erratic behaviour	
Belittling behaviours	
Labelling	
Power and control issues	
	Absenteeism
	Substance abuse
	Psychosomatic symptoms

*Symptoms of teacher stress or burnout were compiled from Hammond (1997) and Eastman (1996).

The teacher behaviours described by the participants of this study align with some of the behaviours characterized in the literature as behaviours of teacher bullies (McEachern et al., 2008). Although many of the perceived behaviours also echo symptoms of stress and burnout, it cannot be discounted that some people may relate to others with a bullying pattern of conduct. Parsons (2005) comments:

Most teachers use their reaction to stress and the authority they possess as entry points into reflecting on and learning more about who they are as individuals.... They learn that, even if teaching is a demanding and stress-filled occupation, the nature of the job is no excuse for abusing the power they wield over their charges. Teacher bullies, on the other hand, use conflict and stress as rationalizations for their behaviour. (p. 39)

Parson's comments suggest that teachers who have a relationship pattern of bullying may act in a similar manner to teachers experiencing burnout, but may see their actions as justified rather than inappropriate. This differentiation is important to action plan development for teachers in need of intervention.

The specific teacher behaviours described by the participant parents were varied in each situation. The combined list of these behaviours parallels the behaviours described in the literature as teacher bullying behaviours. The participants' list of teacher behaviours also correlates somewhat with behaviours descriptive of teachers suffering from stress or burnout. Although teacher stress or burnout behaviours may be an occupational issue, there is no justification for the misplaced actions toward students.

3. How did the parents respond to the belief that their child was being bullied by a teacher?

There are a number of interesting similarities in the parents' responses to the perceived teacher bullying. Four themes emerged from this study: First, the parents followed protocol with the school to address the issue. Second, feelings of guilt were communicated by all of the parents because they didn't act more quickly. Third, if the teacher responded to their questions in an intimidating manner, the parents seemed to be more willing to take the issue to the next step. Finally, the perceived authority of the school and parents' past experiences also played a part in their decision making process.

Protocol

In all of the stories shared, the families discussed their issues with the teacher first. Only when they were not satisfied with the teacher's response did the families address the problem with the next person in the "chain of command." It seems as an educational culture, we have an understood protocol which most parents are willing to follow. However, after the options have been addressed at the school level, the course of action seems to become unclear. Louise commented, *"So when you have approached both teachers and principal of the school and have not got satisfaction, where do you go from there?"*

Feelings of Guilt

Parents also communicated feelings of guilt due to the length of time it took for them to find a solution for their child. Louise commented, *"I remember ... feeling... almost a failure myself for not protecting my kids enough or not recognizing it quickly."* Tina's remarks echo this sentiment of regret, *"In retrospect, I should have taken him out [of the class] the first time we had an issue with his teacher and not sent him back."*

The emotions of the parents during the interviews were palpable. At first, it was just a story telling session, but as the parents relived the events, their words became fraught with intensity, tears, and anger. Although Tina's tears were an obvious indication of emotional response, Louise and Robert indicated that the interview process was difficult for them as well. These emotions were apparent in the couple's lively ethical debate regarding bullying issues in education. Amy's intensity and cutting humour also signaled her reaction to reliving these stories. Even when the event was far removed by time, the passionate parental response to protect was evident.

Intimidation of the Parent Raises the Stakes

Although all of the parents seemed to have a sense there could be an issue with their child's teacher, they were more willing to take action if the teacher had played a power game with them, personally. I believe this may be, for the parent, another form of validation. If the teacher or administrator is willing to use bullying or intimidation tactics with them, then their children's stories become more believable. The parents can see consistency in the reported behaviour with the behaviour observed, and a pattern begins to be established, thus providing the needed validation.

According to Tina, Peter's track coach presented the attitude that *"I'm bigger than you, I'm in charge here and you have no say in this."* It was at this point that she wrote a letter to the principal. Tina was further upset by the way the coach continued to treat her in the hallways, avoiding her eyes and ignoring her presence, even four years later.

Louise was physically and emotionally intimidated by Ross's English teacher in the UK. After this incident, she demanded to see the Head of Year. The three-way conference with Ann's teacher in Canada was intimidating for the whole family. It was extremely difficult for the parents to politely sit and listen as their child's teacher listed Ann's deficits. Louise commented,

"I specifically remember really feeling for Ann. I turned to Ann and said, 'But you know what? You've done marvellously. You came from a different country... We had to give Ann something positive, there was nothing positive came from that teacher... absolutely nothing.'"

Louise and Robert remained polite during their daughter's three-way conference, even though they were upset about the teacher's response to their child. Louise's description of her encounter with her son's teacher also emphasized her need to stay in control. She commented, *"I knew my temper was about to break with him and that's why I left, because I didn't want to let myself down in front of my son, to really lose it."* It seems that for Louise and Robert, their children's perceptions of their parental reactions and responses to adversity were very important. If their children had not been present, perhaps their responses may have been different. After the interview, Louise and Robert began to look for solutions to help their daughter at the school level by contacting the principal and looking for advocates in the parent community.

The *"distasteful"* phone call that Amy received from Jack's grade two teacher was her catalyst to action. She arranged a meeting, not only with the teacher, but also with an administrator. *"The vice-principal really towered over me and the way he spoke to me was like [he was] speaking to a kid that was in trouble."* As a result of the meeting, Amy wrote a letter to the superintendent. Amy was also spurred to action when, as a staff member, she was treated with disrespect by a teacher. It was this incident that drew Amy's attention to the man's behaviour toward the students in the high school.

All of these situations may have been put aside had the parents not experienced what they described as a negative encounter with the teacher, personally. Madsen (1996) found that "a

large amount of teachers and parents overlook incidents which children see as bullying” (p. 19). If the parents had not been negatively affected by the teachers themselves, perhaps they would not have labeled the behaviour of these teachers as bullying.

Perceived Authority of the School

The parents’ expectations of the school shaped by their past experiences also defined their responses. Perceived authority of the school as an entity coloured their decision-making process. Louise comments, “*As I grew up, it was a teacher’s right to discipline how they saw fit.*” Robert describes his concept of bullying in schools, “*We always thought that bullying was just by another child your same age or older than you, never really by a teacher, that was just a teacher’s thing.*” Louise feels that what she was taught to believe as a child may have affected her own children’s perceptions of what is acceptable behaviour for a teacher.

My parents always taught me you will respect educators and do what the teacher tells you. A teacher is not going to do anything wrong to you and if you’ve done something or if you’ve been punished you must have done something to deserve it. I remember that being instilled in me. I felt I never told my parents about [any issues] because I was always worried that I’d get a second telling off or a second punishment from my parents. [I thought] they would believe the teacher... and I actually wonder if that is something I put onto my children. It is strange that they’ve both been bullied by a teacher, by different teachers and I wonder if it is something that we instil in our kids about teachers. [Teachers are] to be respected, they’re professional people; they wouldn’t be teachers unless they really liked children and wanted to educate them. Is it something we’ve [taught] our children?

In an unrecorded conversation (field notes, January 20, 2008), Tina discussed her change in perceptions about schools and teachers. She explained that she always saw teachers as authority figures and she would never have questioned or challenged their decisions. It was not until Tina became friends with an educator that she began to see teachers as people who could make mistakes.

Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) discuss the mixed messages schools send to parents about their role in the school:

While generally in education we speak of parents as partners, tell parents in our school newsletter that we have an open door policy, and talk about parents as their children's first teachers; we unconsciously send other strong messages to parents. With our signs, our displays, our activities and our labelling of space, we position parents in marginalized ways in our school buildings. At best we extend them the privileges of guests and at worst we treat them as unwelcome or bothersome interlopers. (p. 43)

Tina may have begun to feel more a part of the school environment because of her close relationship with an educator. Just as we feel more comfortable in the homes of our friends than in those of acquaintances, Tina may have become more comfortable in the school because of her relationship. Discussions with her friend may also have helped her to feel more engaged in the education of her children. Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) comment: "With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial" (p. 44).

Tina intimated that friendship with an educator gave her the confidence to approach the school about issues to affect change. Perhaps her engagement changed her perception of power and authority to a more equitable scenario between home and school. Tina has since become a very active member of the school parent community.

For Amy, it was education that changed her perceptions of the approachability of teachers in her child's school. Amy stated, *"I was not so easily intimidated and definitely not scared, not of a teacher because I didn't see them at all as authority figures now."*

Manke's (1997) comments that our culture believes that in schools "teachers have the power and students do not" (p. 2). This assertion, coupled with parental memories from their past experiences as a student, can make the school an intimidating entity. All of the parents in this study had to make changes to their perceptions of teachers and authority in order to take parental action on their child's behalf.

The parents' decisions to talk to their child's teacher did not come without concerns. McEvoy (2005) suggests that complaining about a teacher's behaviour could bring about retaliation from the teacher on the child. Robert remarked, *"[When] the door is closed, basically you've got your own class and you can take it out [on them]."*

This was a definite concern for Amy and Tina. Both mothers worried that their intervention as parents could end up causing more issues for their child. Amy knew that even in grade two, Jack was uncomfortable with the idea of his mother talking to the teacher. She explains:

I had debriefed Jack because I didn't want him to be scared to go back to school. First of all, any child is going to be scared when a parent goes to confront the teacher. If they're feeling like they're being bullied by a teacher, I think that's as unnerving for a child as if the parent took on the playground bully because that could make things worse. So now Mom went over to the school and there was a meeting and is that going to make things worse?

Tina believes some teachers do retaliate after they have been questioned. She remarks, “*I found that if I go in and talk to the teacher specifically about my child and his needs, that my child gets targeted after that.*” Only Tina named retaliation as a perceived behaviour of one of her child’s teachers. No other parent discussed this as an actual teacher response, only as a concern.

The participants in this study responded similarly to their beliefs that a teacher was bullying their child. Each family discussed their need to break down barriers set up from past experiences regarding school authority before they responded. Parents acted by contacting the teacher and then the school administrators to deal with their needs, but they were more willing to take further action when perceived power tactics were employed by staff during their interaction.

4. What was the result of the parental response and what are the implications for teacher practice and education?

Two themes emerged from the parents’ perceptions of the results of their actions: what they know occurred and what they suspect occurred. The parents had a lot to say about what they feel should have happened in response to their action and they have many other concerns and suggestions regarding their perceptions of the possible implications for teachers and schools.

Results from the School or School Board

According to the parents, the bullying behaviours of the teachers were never directly addressed by the school. In Amy’s situation with the grade eight teacher, the behaviours were addressed by her and, to her knowledge, never repeated. The parents believe that schools and

school boards do not address problems directly, but come up with ways to minimize the issues. Louise explains:

I believe the teachers are moved or [the schools] move the child of the parents who's complaining... I believe that teacher is just moved around to become someone else's problem instead of actually addressing the issue with that teacher or even trying to find out why...I don't know if I'm right or wrong but that's what I believe.

Robert agrees, but feels that moving the teacher just prolongs the issue. He comments, "The real fact is that the teacher is moved away from the school and from your child personally." He adds, "Do you really bother now that it's going to [cause issues] for someone else's children?" Robert feels that records should be kept regarding issues to ensure there is not a pattern of behaviour. He comments:

If a teacher is moved from one school for bullying and he goes to another school [the behaviour] should be monitored... If the teacher is moved to another school, there's got to be a follow up, just like a probation period... to find out if they're doing the same [thing]. If they're doing the same thing, then it needs to be addressed because then it's just moving the problem on and on and on without being addressed.

Louise agrees. She feels it is an ethical concern that needs to be addressed appropriately. Louise observes, "We've already agreed that we think Ross ...is still affected by that bullying and we're now talking what four years later? How many other kids is that teacher going to do that to?"

Amy also feels that schools and school boards try to come up with alternative solutions rather than address the problem directly. She comments:

What happens is [the teachers] get promoted, they get taken out of the classroom, but because the school board typically doesn't want to give a paid leave of absence, they end up pulling them downtown to work as a consultant or they drum something up like a project... Or they become administrators... I think that it's the school board's way of dealing with something and they see it as being efficient and quick and easy and cost effective and yet they haven't dealt with it at all. I think that they just move things along... in the same way that I believe that good teachers are often penalized and not made

administrators. If you're a good teacher, the boat hasn't been rocked, parents haven't been complaining, your work is done, your marks are in on time, your classroom seems to be going fine... I think that they don't reward those people.

Tina believes that often teachers who cause issues for students in the classroom will be promoted to administration positions. She remarks:

I think that essentially the school system is run in a good way and I think that people recognize when teachers who are in that profession need to move away from the kids. I see that occasionally, what happens is that they will move the one that's a self starter, very organized, very professional up because they don't want him anywhere near the kids... He's likely to be the next one promoted up.

Amy agrees, “*They see them as not taking any crap.*”

These parental perceptions echo Parsons (2005) who suggests that those who control students, by any means, are rewarded with a reputation of being strict, or tough. Manke (1997) agrees that school communities and boards continue to prize classroom control over positive learning outcomes for students.

Amy feels that promotion for these teachers may not be a good choice for the school culture. She comments:

If you take that person and give them an administrative position they may in turn use that bullying style to deal with their staff... and I think that that's probably something that's just intrinsic within the person, that's how they relate to other people and unfortunately that's just how they're going to continue in their work... So now they're not working with kids as much, but they're working with teachers and so they're going to bully the teachers.

Although adults should be more equipped to deal with this type of behaviour, Amy feels it sends the wrong message to the children and may affect the way the school deals with bullying issues. She remarks:

If you're a bully, you're less likely to criticize bullying behaviour. You're less likely to come down hard when you see that behaviour, because you either don't see it as wrong or you're not going to address it when you see other teachers bullying kids or kids

bullying other kids. I think it could become a part of the cycle; a part of the school's culture.

Bullying Policies and Education for School Communities

All of the participants mentioned bullying policies in their interviews. Louise and Robert feel schools are beginning to educate students about bullying behaviours and that their children have a better understanding of the concept now than they did a few years ago. Robert comments:

I think in all schools, the bullying part of it ... has been brought more to the [students' attention]... [Students are able to] recognize bullying ... all types of bullying. We always thought that bullying was just by another child your same age or older than you, never really by a teacher, that was just a teacher's thing... I think they know far more about bullying now. The whole concept of bullying, parent bullying, teacher bullying, peer bullying; all that kind of stuff, I think ... has been brought to more people's attention now.

Louise and Robert are not sure if their children recognized or labeled their teachers as bullies at the time, but feel that Ross and Ann are now more mature and have been exposed to more information about bullying. Louise comments:

I think Ross would not have [seen the teacher as a bully] at the time, but now he would recognize it. He would have thought, "That's just one of those teachers and that's the teacher's right." Now Ross would recognize a teacher as a bully... [Ann would have] felt, 'She didn't like me, that teacher didn't like me'... She might now [see the teacher's actions as bullying] because she's taken a turning point of ... maturity...

Amy feels that bullying policies for schools should include everyone in the school community. She remarks:

I think that if the schools have a zero tolerance policy for bullying among the children, then they should have a zero tolerance policy for adults bullying children. I think that they should get rid of people who have any sort of patterned behaviour... There probably has to be strategies put in place first to empower parents and students to know what [teacher bullying] looks like... and to recognize it. [Parents and students need] to feel like they have the capability of bringing it to someone's attention. In the same way that a student is going to be afraid to rat out a bully if the bully is another kid, it's probably

monumentally worse if it's a teacher. Maybe there should be an awareness campaign, but that's a can of un-opened worms.

Tina agrees:

I don't agree with putting [a bullying policy] in place for the kids if it's not in place for the adults... I don't see it working for the adults, so I don't know how they could possibly try to teach the children if they're going to continually bully each other and the kids... I truly believe it's their responsibility as administrators to fix it at the adult level and then move it down to the kids.

Parsons (2005) echoes the parents' perspectives. He comments:

We're starting to realize that bullying in schools isn't just a childhood disease like chicken pox. Bullying is an adult contagion that erupts most noticeably in our schools among students. But principals also bully; so do teachers; and so do parents. What we're coming to realize is that bullying can be eradicated only if everyone in a school environment – adult as well as student - takes the cure. (p. 7)

Louise believes that having a bullying policy in the school is not enough. She believes that schools need “*a policy that works, not one that looks good on paper.*” Robert is very cautious about the direction of the policy. Although he believes there are teacher bullies and that they can cause damage to children, he is concerned for the teachers and their profession.

You've got to be very careful because ... the word bullying can [mean] different things ... and young minds might think something's bullying, but really it's not bullying. It's a very fine line to tread on ... I think that you've got to be very careful.

The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation (STF) is an organization that represents and supports over 12 000 teachers in Saskatchewan. One of its functions is professional stewardship and responsibility. This function is described by their web site:

- To raise the status of the teaching profession.
- To support teachers in their efforts to demonstrate exemplary professional practice.
- To model the norms of a self-regulating profession.

- To establish and maintain standards of professional ethics and competency for teachers in accordance with Part VI of The Teachers' Federation Act, 2006.
- To carry on activities, in a manner consistent with the public interest, that improve:
 - the quality of education, and
 - the delivery of education support for and by teachers. (STF, 2007)

Article 9 of the STF's Code of Ethics discusses the expectations for teachers' actions when dealing with individual students. Included in this article is the following statement:

At no time in dealing with a student should a teacher be physically, verbally, emotionally or sexually abusive, nor should the teacher be physically or emotionally neglectful. It is the duty of the teacher, within the context of the school program, to care for students, enhance their well-being, and protect them from harm of any kind. (STF, 2006, p. 18)

Clearly, the STF has established ethical guidelines which do not accept bullying behaviours. The STF is responsible to maintain this code of conduct for its members. The following outlines the steps taken to ensure compliance:

The Executive of the STF may upon receiving a written complaint make a preliminary investigation into the facts regarding the conduct of a member, and if in its opinion, the facts justify a more thorough investigation, the Executive shall order a hearing by the Professional Ethics Committee, the Professional Competency Committee or the Collective Interests Committee, as the case requires. (STF, 2006, p. 4))

The expectations of the STF, a professional organization of teachers, clearly mirror an anti-bullying policy for educators. If these behavioural expectations already exist, why do parents believe their children have been bullied by teachers? Why is this code of ethics not reflected in school practice? Why, in the perception of the parent participants, have none of these behaviours been addressed?

Robert feels that school boards need to assist teachers, through support groups or awareness training. He comments:

[Teachers should have access to] retraining, anger management [seminars] or anything like that because it's all available nowadays. I think a teacher that can't put across the subjects or what they're teaching [to their students] and who finds it frustrating may need some kind of, not retraining as such, but discussion groups or [something like that]. You have got to remember that the teachers are there to teach, but they're people as well.

Louise agrees, but is not willing to put a child in jeopardy.

I really believe that the school board should be monitoring [incidents] and if there's an issue... if there are repetitive incidents ... you should go through all the political correct ... steps that could be done before you could write [the teacher] off as ... just a rotten teacher.

Robert believes policy will be problematic because monitoring without violating teachers' and students' rights can be very difficult. He believes there is only so much a school board can do because, *"as soon as the door closes and you become the teacher, there's no one in there to monitor you. It's a free game."*

According to a study conducted by Twemlow, Fonagy, Sacco and Brethour (2006), teachers who have been bullied as children often have issues as teachers. This could include bullying others or being bullied themselves. These findings are echoed by Craig and Pepler (2007). They state that childhood bullying can lead to very aggressive behaviour later in adulthood. These studies answer Louise's question, *"I haven't read it or known it, but I actually wondered how many of [these teacher] were bullied themselves... and have now become the bullies?"* For these teachers, it may be necessary to address childhood issues, and behaviour patterns, through training. The STF offers counseling services to any member who is in need of support for any reason, including the desire to make changes in relationship patterns, teacher stress, anxiety and depression. Although this service is available, those in need may not recognize their issues unless they have been addressed.

Creating a code of ethics or a bullying policy may not be enough to eradicate bullying from the school culture. The parent participants suggest that policy and codes of ethics may only be effective if they are compliance driven and all stakeholders understand and support the initiatives. Perhaps educators and administrators should consider better ways to assist colleagues in recognizing negative behaviour patterns.

Tina believes teachers have been given more responsibility without adequate support. She comments:

I think our kids really need to have somebody behind them and I think it needs to be the teacher...I've seen a lot of smart kids be bullied by teachers ...whether it's that they are shunned or ignored or set aside. I believe that happens because the teachers don't know how to deal with [smart kids]. I don't think there's enough education for the teachers right now about how to deal with smart kids. I think teachers have to teach to the mainstream and below and that anybody who is above that has to suck it up because there's no additional programming available for them in the early years.

Finally, all of the participants at one point felt that some teachers should consider a different profession. Noddings (2005) states, “We all have known teachers who are cruel and uncaring, and these people should not be in teaching at all” (p. 1). Amy echoes this sentiment, “[Teacher bullying] happens, it happens more than people realize... it happens for a variety of reasons and not all people who teach are fit to teach.”

According to the participants' perceptions, the schools and school boards did not deal appropriately with their concerns about teacher bullying. The parents raised a number of issues which relate to this perceived lack of response. They feel teacher bullying behaviour needs to be addressed in order to ensure students can learn in a safe and positive environment. They further believe school communities need to look at better ways to deal with teachers who should not, for whatever reason, be in contact with students. Finally, the parents felt bullying policies should be more comprehensive to include all of the stakeholders in the school community.

Summary

This chapter addressed the original research questions with respect to themes derived from the experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study. Chapter six will build upon these themes and discuss the implications for the various stakeholders in the school community. Recommendations for further research and final thoughts will follow.

Chapter Six:

Implications, Future Research and Personal Reflections

This study illuminated a number of main themes which lead to implications for school communities including school boards and administrators, classroom educators, parents and students. This chapter highlights possibilities for the school community, questions for further research and a personal reflection on this study.

Implications

School Boards and School Administrators

School boards and administrators can have a great impact on bullying behaviours in the classroom. The following section outlines some of the implications this study revealed for school boards and school administrators as stakeholders in the school community: accessibility to parents, addressing bullying behaviours and bullying policy, teacher stress, training initiatives, issues specific to elementary school communities and outside agency involvement.

School board and administrative accessibility for parents

The participants in this study felt they had access to their child's teacher and the school principal, but, except for Amy, did not feel comfortable to contact or even seem to know how to access anyone at the school board or upper administrative personnel. From the participants' stories, it becomes evident invitations and clear contact information for parents may assist parents in addressing issues or giving compliments to their local school communities. Other agencies have successfully developed systems to support the public in reporting issues. Police services across North America have instituted telephone services for citizens to report crimes. Teen help lines and various other support services have created a venue for people to voice their concerns or find assistance. Perhaps a parent help line, web site or even posters could direct parents to those in the position to address their needs.

Addressing bullying behaviours

According to the stories shared by the participants, the bullying behaviours of the teachers were never addressed by the school community. This does not mean that the behaviours were never addressed; it means that if any action took place, it was not communicated to the parents. The perceptions of the parents were clear; nothing was being done. This perception has two apparent implications. First, if action is taken to prevent future incidents of bullying by the teacher in question, informing parents may indicate the school has heard and acted upon their concern. Perhaps the response to reporting bullying behaviour could be addressed in policy to safeguard the accused and honour the concerns of the reporter.

Second, the parents in this study suggested that administrative action included: moving a person, promoting them or ignoring or renaming the issue. If this is true, school administrators may need to look at effective and alternative strategies to eliminate teacher bullying in all school environments. Perhaps directly addressing the concerns would be a start. Other options could include counseling, mentorship and supervision. Because bullying is a pattern of behaviour, recidivism may be a concern, so ongoing monitoring may be a necessary consideration.

Bullying policy

Bullying policies have become mandatory in many school jurisdictions. The viewpoints of the participants in this study implied that bullying policy should include all stakeholders of the school community including administrators, teachers, parents and students. To eliminate a bullying culture in our schools it appears that including all of the individuals who interact in the school community will be important.

The parents in this study believe the present bullying policies do not promote changes to bullying behaviours in school communities. As with all policy development, an awareness of the policy and its expectations is essential for compliance to occur. To address the participant parents' concerns, an awareness course which outlines the policy and provides an opportunity for questions could be implemented for teachers, students and parents. Perhaps a course could be developed for families to work through together. This could be online, or short take home assignments. Staff awareness could be achieved through a brief addition to weekly staff meetings. Tailgate meetings are currently being used to promote compliance for occupational safety policy in industry. These brief training sessions highlight safe practice for various industry

issues such as the use of fire extinguishers or the cleaning and storage of safety equipment. Perhaps this training methodology could be modified to promote anti-bullying policy in schools.

According to the parent participants, some administrators may overlook the possibility that some of the teachers employed in schools bully students. It may be necessary to take all reported incidents seriously in order to protect the students entrusted to the schools by their parents. Perhaps school bullying policy could include a clear course of action for administrators to deal with all concerns about bullying behaviour. Mandated action creates transparency so that all stakeholders understand the process.

Teacher stress

There were many parallels between teacher bullying behaviours and the behaviours of teachers suffering from stress or burnout. In my experience, there seems to be a perceived stigma attached to stress leave, so teachers who are in need of this medical break may refuse intervention because they will not risk career advancement. Further, many employers in other fields have the opportunity to give their workers a change in job description for a short time. Aside from changing venues or grade levels, there are few opportunities for educators to recharge in a different setting. Perhaps alternatives could be made available to administrators to assist teachers who have issues.

The alternatives are only limited by creativity. Adding a teacher assistant to the classroom of an at-risk teacher could reduce the classroom workload. Extra planning time or release from extra-curricular or supervision duties could also assist teachers who are burning out. Short sabbaticals with decreased pay could offer teachers the necessary renewal to continue their work as educators without the stigma of a stress leave. Even one week of holidays every five years while school is in session would allow teachers to make wellness choices for renewal. Although the cost may seem prohibitive, could associated expenses for sick leave, teacher burnout and classroom repercussions outweigh the price tag?

There seems to be parallels between the bullying behaviours perceived by the participants in this study and the literature on teacher stress or burnout. If school boards and administrators are vigilant regarding teacher stress and burnout, they would be able to take action before students are at risk of bullying from teachers. Additionally, many school staff members may want to sensitively and safely help at risk colleagues. Although educators do not want to cause

problems for co-workers, a transparent policy which acts upon the code of ethics already in place may address the bigger picture of student safety and teacher wellness. If members of professional associations such as the STF are already provided with counseling opportunities, perhaps bullying behaviours of teachers could be minimized through awareness and support. A clear course of action may be perceived by teachers as a better choice than compensating or covering for colleagues who need help.

Training

All of the parent participants told stories about teachers who took an aggressive or defensive stance when dealing with parents or students. The parents intimated there were better ways to handle these situations. Perhaps conflict management training could be provided for educators and teacher candidates. The tools acquired through training may help teachers positively deal with stressful situations with colleagues, students and parents. Many other professionals who deal with power and compliance situations, like police officers and corrections employees, have access to training to help them deal with potential conflicts. Conflict management training highlighting unsuitable responses to difficult situations and replacing them with more positive actions could reframe solutions for teachers. Identification of inappropriate behaviours would also be easier. As a result, prosocial compliance-gaining techniques could replace antisocial techniques (Golish & Olson, 2000). Professional development could occur in many formats including face to face inservicing or online options. Conflict management training may provide educators and teacher candidates a reference for alternative action for difficult situations.

Elementary school issues

This study raised the possibility that elementary school children's responses to bullying teachers may be more severe than students from high school settings. Avoidance strategies for elementary school children are not as easy as they are for high school students, who can choose to drop one class or change teachers. Elementary students have prolonged contact with one homeroom teacher and one group of peers. If this teacher or a child from this classroom is engaged in bullying behaviour, the targets may endure extensive negative exposure with few opportunities for relief. This study emphasized that an awareness of these differences may be important for administrators, school boards and other stakeholders or agencies involved in

bullying policy or action plan development for their school communities. My question is: Should differences between elementary and high school student situations be taken into account by stakeholders when deciding measures to deal with bullying?

Outside agency involvement

In an unrecorded conversation with a non-participant parent (field notes, January 26, 2008), the idea of involving an outside agency for reporting and investigating bullying was discussed. I found this to be a fascinating suggestion because it took away many of the issues associated with internal investigations. An outside agency could offer an impartial examination of the situation and propose solutions for reporting and eliminating bullying in the form of advice, counseling, record keeping and training. As citizens, we have the responsibility to report child abuse to social agencies who act upon the information to protect the child. Considering the consequences for the victim, perhaps this is a viable solution for all bullying issues as well.

This study raised implications and questions for the involvement of school boards and administrators with respect to the bullying culture of schools. How can parents better access school boards and upper administrators to address their needs? Are there better ways to address bullying behaviours of educators? How can bullying policies already in place be improved? Does teacher stress/burnout contribute to teacher bullying? Do teachers and teacher candidates receive adequate training for conflict management? Are elementary school students more at risk than high school students? Should an outside agency for reporting and investigation of bullying be considered?

Teachers

This study examined parents' perceptions of teachers who bully students. Teachers are a major stakeholder in this issue and there are implications for teacher conduct and support that may affect some parental perceptions including professional image, power and authority, communication with parents, understanding and recognizing the effects of bullying and teacher stress or burnout.

First impressions

In this inquiry, parents' first impressions of teachers contributed to their belief that their child was being bullied by the teacher. As it is not possible to prove whether bullying was

occurring, it is important to consider that these perceptions could also be mistaken. Classroom educators may not be aware of the impact their professional image and demeanor has on parents.

Parent participants relied on their experiences and intuition when forming opinions about teacher actions reported by their children. If their child's report did not fit with the parents' perceptions of the teacher, they looked for other clues before taking action. Presenting an inviting and professional image to parents could alleviate possible unsubstantiated issues from children's tales.

Power and authority

According to this study, the parents' perceptions of the school's power and authority affected their engagement in the school life of their children. Teachers may see parents in a different light if they begin to recognize that the parents of their students come to them from varying backgrounds and preconceptions rooted in their own childhood experiences as students. Inviting participation from parents who have not had positive experiences with education and opening the door to conversation may help parents discuss their perceptions before there is a problem. Pushor and Murphy (2004) describe positive outcomes for students because of trust and relationship building between parents and teachers. "When we advocate for using parents' knowledge, we are not downplaying the importance of teachers' knowledge or suggesting that it be replaced with parents' knowledge... What interests us is exploring possibilities for laying parent knowledge alongside that of teachers" (p. 234).

It is important to recognize that people, including children, may perceive teacher actions in different ways. Hunt and Hunt (2005) comment, "People are complicated and they do not all respond to the same stimuli in similar manners" (p. 102). What teachers may see as reasonable control could be terrifying for some children. Hunt and Hunt (2005) further state, "Of course, teachers are people too. Like students we have bad days and off days and days when we should have spent a little more time planning an activity and a little less time sleeping" (p. 102). If teachers are able to recognize that children may internalize a busy day as "a day the teacher ignored me" they may become more in tune with their students' perceptions and be able to alleviate misinterpretations of their unconscious actions.

Communication with parents

In the parents' stories there appeared to be little or no relationship between the parents and their child's teacher. Because of this lack of connection, I feel that regular communication with parents may help teachers build a feeling of united interest in their child's well-being. Brushing aside parental concerns could lead to an impression of indifference or apathy. As Maples (2007) indicates parents want teachers to have a "deeper insight" (p. 22) about their children. Parents want to feel that aside from teaching students, the teacher also cares for their child. Regular communication through classroom letters, e-mail, or telephone calls may build a rapport necessary to create this trust.

Bullying effects

Considering the detrimental physical and emotional effects of bullying as indicated by both the parents' perceptions and the associated literature, teachers' awareness of these symptoms in children could enable them to recognize possible issues in their classroom. The symptoms of bullying could be apparent in students whether it is peer bullying or their teacher's choice of actions. Because of these possible issues, introspection and analysis of classroom climate is important to the well-being of students.

Teacher stress/burnout

Because of the parallels in the literature between bullying and stress/burnout behaviours in teachers, I wonder if bullying behaviours could be a symptom of teacher stress or burnout. It would be helpful for educators to be aware that stress can alter behaviours and attitudes. Vigilance may help to ensure teacher wellness is not the only victim of this malady.

As was stated earlier, a venue for educators to help colleagues who are experiencing symptoms of stress and burnout may be welcomed. A proactive and non-judgmental process could ensure that colleagues do not risk their perceived professionalism or the professional reputations of those for whom they feel concern. As documented, bullying behaviours can cause immeasurable damage to a child and to the school community. For some professionals, compensating for colleagues is not enough, but alternative measures are unclear or too stressful. A clear reporting avenue for teachers which protects all of the stakeholders could offer alternatives for those who, at present, hesitate to get involved.

This study raised implications and questions for teachers. Do teachers understand the importance of first impressions on their professional image? How can teachers positively change parental perceptions of the power and authority of schools? How important is relationship building between parents and teachers? Are teachers aware of the symptoms of bullying for students? How can teachers support one another to combat teacher stress and burnout and the behavioural fallout?

Parents

Parents' perceptions were the focus of this study. A number of implications arose as a result. These include: first impressions of teachers, recognizing the effects of bullying in children, and the importance of parental involvement with respect to confidence and action.

First impressions

The parent participants in this study relied on their impressions of their children's teachers to make judgments about the validity of the children's stories. Some teachers may, however, be able to minimize their classroom behaviour and present a very professional image to parents. Parsons (2005) comments:

Adult bullies often don't see themselves as who they are. They explain away their aggression as taking decisive action, their abusive language as honesty, their inconsistencies as flexibility, and their rigidity and obsession with trifles as thoroughness. These kinds of bullies rarely admit to errors; mistakes are someone else's fault...The teacher known as the scourge of the classroom presents a kinder, gentler, more reasonable face to anyone who might be a potential threat. (pp. 39-40)

The stories shared by children about teachers may, at times, seem incredible, but sometimes parents' first impressions of teachers can also be misleading. Parsons (2005) suggests some teachers may present a positive political impression to adults because they justify their behaviours to themselves. If a teacher does not recognize their bullying behaviours as inappropriate, they may misrepresent the truth of the classroom situation. Since parents seem to rely on their intuition and first impressions, the teacher's response could cloud the issue. Perhaps discussions of perceived issues with teachers and administrators in the school community followed by continuous monitoring may be a better solution for parents.

Bullying effects

The parent participants eventually recognized the symptoms of bullying in their children. If parents are aware of the devastating effects of bullying on children, they may recognize the symptoms in their children. Discussing a child's symptoms with teachers, administrators or school counselors could ensure intervention measures are put into place for the student. The bullying could be from any source because the symptoms tend to be very similar, but clear procedures for reporting would help parents to safeguard their child.

Getting involved

Parent participants in this study discussed their preconceptions about the accessibility of the school hierarchy. Although the parents understood the "chain of command" within the school, they hesitated to even approach their child's classroom teacher with issues. Once they believed teacher bullying was involved, their concerns grew. Although schools attempt to invite parents into the school, parents are still hesitant because of past experiences. Perhaps the parent community could help to break down these barriers.

Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) discuss hospitality and invitation with respect to parent engagement. They comment:

Whenever we talked about ways to make parents feel welcome, ways to help parents decide to attend a school event, ways to encourage parents to share their thoughts in a staff meeting, the same words could be heard: "Invite, invite, invite." They weren't just words, a formula that sounded good but meant little: behind these words a whole world of meaning lay hidden. (p. 32)

Although schools are encouraged by these words to invite parents into the school for meaningful involvement, parents, as stakeholders in the school community, could strengthen the invitation to reluctant members of the parent community. "Repeated invitation is important, especially in the context of an aboriginal community in which many people have had negative experiences with schooling, residential or not" (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 34). An invitation from parents in the school community may enable those who have authority perceptions or negative past school experiences to feel safe within the walls of the school and to reassess some of their assumptions built on their past knowledge.

The parents in this study needed support from others to validate their child's bullying story. Encouraging parents to engage in meaningful discussion about education may give parents a venue to discuss their concerns. Placing a positive spin on parent talk could alleviate the rumors or hearsay and create a constructive force to safeguard all of the stakeholders.

This study also raised the idea that education for parents helps to break down the barriers toward schools. With many parents feeling intimidated by the concept of school as an institution, it may be worthwhile to occasionally offer classes for parents in the school during the time when classes for their children are in session. This would offer parents the opportunity to become a community of learners as well as the chance to interact with all of the stakeholders of the school community. Perhaps employers would consider these educational opportunities to be valuable and offer paid release time for upgrading.

Parents' perceptions were the focal point of this study. Implications and questions surfaced for this stakeholder of the school community. Should parents rely on more than their positive first impressions of teachers when dealing with issues? How can parents become informed of the symptoms and effects of bullying on children? How can all school community stakeholders encourage parental engagement?

Students

Although this study looked at the perceptions of parents, their children were instrumental in the formulation of the parental belief that teacher bullying was occurring. While many students have been sensitized to peer bullying behaviours, teacher bullying behaviours have rarely been studied, let alone taught to students. What would happen if students were given opportunities to express their concerns about their teachers? How can schools offer this group of stakeholders a voice? Who should teach appropriate behaviours and model them for students? Giving voice and language to student concerns could be perceived by stakeholders, specifically the students and teachers, as an opportunity to criticize and make up stories. However, consistent issues could become evident and "a pattern of conduct, rooted in a power differential that threatens, harms, humiliates, induces fear, or causes emotional distress" (McEvoy, 2005, p. 1) may be brought into the open.

Implications for the various stakeholders of school communities emerged from this study. School boards and administrators, teachers, parents and students have a responsibility and

potential power to affect change in the bullying culture of schools. More research is necessary to inform and empower school communities.

Future Research

This study opened the door to parental viewpoints and perceptions about teacher bullying. The participants shared their stories and offered an information-rich window to their lived experiences. Because this was a qualitative study, the participant sample was small and the results cannot be generalized. However, themes and patterns emerged from the transcript data and many new questions have surfaced as a result of this study. The following lists some of the research questions I believe could be important:

- Are the stories shared by the participants of this study isolated cases or indicative of a more common issue?
- How are parents' concerns about teacher bullying actually being addressed by principals and other administrative staff?
- Would the children of the participants view these teachers as bullies? Do parents and students perceive the behaviours of teachers in the same way?
- How does age, or perceived social status, affect parents' actions when they believe their child is being bullied by a teacher?
- How do students in elementary schools respond differently to teacher bullying than students in high school?
- How could the meaningful engagement of parents in school communities affect perceptions of teacher bullying?
- How do teachers respond when they believe a colleague is bullying students in their school community?
- How may teacher stress or burnout actually be connected to the bullying of students?
- How may it be possible to alter the bullying behaviour patterns of a seasoned teacher?

- If bullying teachers are in fact promoted to administrative positions as per the participants' beliefs, how does this affect school culture?
- If bullying was eliminated from schools, how would this affect our society?

Final Thoughts

Bullying has become a hot topic for school communities in North America and around the world. Although peer bullying has been researched quite extensively, teacher bullying has remained relatively obscure in the literature and education of the school community.

I believe, from personal experience as a parent and educator, that teacher bullying can have a negative effect on children, families and school environments. For the child, the situation may appear to be hopeless. For the family, particularly the parents, dealing with the child's symptoms can be frustrating, confusing and heartbreaking. The personal emotional turmoil the parents described was experienced through the phases of questioning, disbelief, helplessness, anger and resignation.

Although this study was originally devised in response to my questions about parental perceptions of teachers who bully students, many people, to my surprise, have shown great interest in the findings. I did not expect to spend time discussing my thesis with relative strangers at a track meet, or have requests from friends, colleagues and their children to read the document when it is finished. What I have found amazing are the readily shared stories that emerge when the topic of this thesis is introduced into conversation, usually by someone else. Everyone seems to have a story, if not from their childhood, then from experiences of their children or their friend's children.

When I think back to the parent who worried all summer about the new teacher who would influence her daughter, I can now recognize her concerns. As a new teacher, I tried to put myself in her position, but it wasn't until I was a parent that I realized the impact a teacher can have on the development of children both positively and negatively.

Although I have lived the experiences of teacher bullying as a student, colleague and parent, I never fully recognized the importance of parents' perspectives to this topic until I immersed myself in their stories and the corresponding literature. This study opens a

conversation important to the field of education and student well-being. It gives voice to parents and encourages school community stakeholders to make changes to improve relationships in school communities. This research has the potential to provide information which gives people courage to take action to eliminate teacher bullying. It also provides direction and ideas for continuing research regarding teacher bullying.

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Appendix A:

Letter of Consent for Participation

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a study entitled: *Teachers Who Bully Students: the Parents' Perspectives*. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions.

Researcher(s): Susan Reschny (xxx-xxxx), M.Ed. Candidate, Department of Curriculum Studies, U of S with her supervisor, Dr. Debbie Pushor, Department of Curriculum Studies, U of S (xxx-xxxx).

Purpose and Procedure: The main purpose of this research is to provide information regarding parental perspectives about teachers who bully students. The procedure will involve interviews with parents who believe that their child was bullied by a teacher. Participation in this research process is voluntary. These interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed. You will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts for approval prior to the analysis stage of the research. The interviews should take approximately 90 minutes to complete. The data from these interviews will be themed in aggregate or summarized form. Any direct quotations will be anonymous. The findings from this study will be reported in a thesis.

Potential Risks: There are no risks for parents participating in the interview. In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms will be connected to these interviews.

Potential Benefits: There are no direct benefits to the participants. Potential for benefit to the wider community would be a greater understanding of teacher bullying from a parental perspective, however these benefits are not necessarily guaranteed.

Storage of Data: The data collected in the interview does not require any identifying information. In the case where identifying information appears in interview transcripts, pseudonyms will be used. The surveys will be safely stored in the office of Dr. Debbie Pushor in the Department of Curriculum Studies in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan for 5 years.

Confidentiality: This research will be used by Susan Reschny to complete the requirements for the College of Graduate Studies' Masters Program at the University of Saskatchewan. The data and findings may also be used in conference proceedings, journal articles, and other scholarly works. A master's thesis will be written to disseminate the findings. Any direct quotations from participants will be anonymous, as pseudonyms will be used; the identity of all participants will be kept confidential.

The consent forms will be stored separately from the transcripts, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Given the method of participant selection, absolute anonymity is not possible. The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion, but cannot guarantee that the referring individual will respect anonymity.

After your interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.

Right to Withdraw: Participation is voluntary, and anyone may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. Interview participants may decline to answer individual questions. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. If any new information comes to light which may affect your decision to participate in this study, you will be immediately informed.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point. You are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided above if you have questions at a later time. This study was approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on December 19, 2007. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect. Participants may find out about the results of the study by contacting Susan Reschny.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above and I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

(Name of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

Appendix B:

Letter of Consent for Transcript Release

Transcript Release Form

Participant's Interview

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript

(print your name here, please)

of my interview, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in the interview with Susan Reschny. I hereby authorize release of this transcript to Susan Reschny to be used in the manner described in the consent form.

(Your signature)

(date)

Susan Reschny

(date)